

NOVELS
BY
WILLIAM LE QUEUX

AS WE FORGIVE THEM
THE SIGN OF THE STRANGER
AN EYE FOR AN EYE
THE IDOL OF THE TOWN
THE COURT OF HONOUR
DEVIL'S DICE
THE DAY OF TEMPTATION
THE CLOSED BOOK

SINS OF . . THE CITY

A STORY OF CRAFT,
CRIME AND CAPITAL

BY
WILLIAM LE QUEUX



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SINS OF THE CITY

SINS OF THE CITY

CHAPTER I

A WITHERED LEAF

"THERE are surely other objects in this life than the mere making of money, aren't there?"

"You wouldn't think so, my dear fellow, if you had much to do with the City. There, it's money, money, nothing but money, and don't be too particular how you get it, so long as you do get it. Mind you, I like making a little bit myself, honestly, as well as anybody, but I draw the line. What I make, I make with clean hands, figuratively, of course, for in electrical engineering one has to soil one's fingers sometimes, but then it's clean dirt and will wash off. And some of the City dirt won't."

"You're quite right, Mildmay, quite right," replied the other. "I think it was that as much as anything which made me take up my wandering, exploring line of life. I had a look in at the City, as you know, and I very soon had enough of its money-grubbing ways. I longed to get away into a healthier, purer atmosphere, and, having a certain amount of income of my own, I set off for Northern Siberia."

"And nearly got frozen to death. Then by way of warming yourself into life again, off you go to Africa and paddle up the Congo, and as if that were not enough, you must take a boating trip up the Aruwimi, right to the source—"

"By Jove, Mildmay! I wish you had been with me. It was the most interesting journey I ever made; even you would have enjoyed it."

"Thanks, but if I am to have fever, I prefer having it at home, where I can be decently and comfortably nursed, and not among the swamps, the flies and the heat. No, thank you, Old England's good enough for me."

The two men, both in evening dress, and divided by a fringe of similarly clad spectators, had been standing leaning against the barrier which separates the seats from the promenade in the grand circle of the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square. The famous Bandini Family were doing their turn, and apparently risking their necks in every conceivable manner, in mid-air. When at length they had finished and the curtain had hidden them, standing in a line, hand in hand, on the stage, bowing and smiling in response to the applause which had greeted their efforts, the two men left the places they had occupied and sauntered in the direction of the bar.

The younger of them, Gerald Mildmay, a dark, good-looking young fellow, was carrying his light-coloured dust-coat over his arm, for the theatre was warm, and by his side walked his old friend, Wallace Vipan, a tall, thin, spare figure, whose rather bony face was weather-beaten by the storms of the north, and tanned by the southern

sun. He was about forty, but travel and privations had turned his hair prematurely grey, yet on his face was the pleasant, careless expression of the true cosmopolitan.

• “It is real good running across old friends,” he said, as they seated themselves at one of the small tables and lit their cigars. “Yours is the only face in all this crowd that I know. I was beginning to feel quite solitary.”

“You solitary? I can’t quite swallow that. You who seem to spend your life poking your nose into all the out-of-the-way corners of the earth you can find—places wherein no other white man has ever been before. You’d never feel solitary.”

“Not in those places, certainly, but in a crowd like this I get the blues at once, unless I have a chum. This place brings back the memories of the old days you know, my dear old fellow.”

“And so you’re just back from South America?” continued Mildmay, when he had obtained a satisfactory light to his cigar.

“Yes, I had a most interesting trip. Started on the west coast, at Lima, and worked right across the Continent till I struck the sea again at Rio, something over two thousand four hundred miles.”

“Whew! And have you made a pot over it?”

“Hardly. I’ve spent a pot, as you term it,” replied Vipan, smiling.

“Then what in the name of wonder was the good of going? Well, certainly I haven’t been given a medal with ‘Aruwimi’ engraved on it, nor may I write F.R.G.S. after my name, but at the same time

I'm not liable to an attack of fever every second day, I've got no grey hairs above my ears, and my face isn't lined like a ploughed field by hunger, thirst and privation. So, on the whole, I think I have the best of the bargain."

"As you will, my boy. Each one must follow his own taste. But tell me, how are things with you? Are you making a pile?"

"Hardly that, but I'm just jogging along slowly. There's a lot of competition in our line in London."

"I should think so; London's played out. You should set up in some of the cities I've seen. You'd coin dollars there. Cuzco, for instance; there's water-power, metal, labour, all that you want, and no great competition to make you cut prices. Think it over and come out with me when I return."

"What, Vipan? You're never thinking of going back there, surely? But then you were always fond of new places."

"There are more unlikely things than my return. But you call it a new place. Look at that! I'll make you a present of it," and Vipan drew from his pocket and threw on to the table a little image in solid gold, very quaintly formed and chased.

"Thanks awfully, but what is it?" asked Mildmay, picking it up and examining it."

"Evidence that Peru isn't quite as new a place as you seem to think. You're holding in your hand the work of some Inca, who lived before Pizarro and his devils of Spaniards played the deuce with the inhabitants in the sixteenth century."

"Then there's gold there?"

"Gold, silver, copper, cinnabar—everything a man can want, though some of it requires finding, and— Hulloa, Olcott!" and Vipán sprang to his feet to greet a man who halted in front of the table and was regarding him with an uncertain look.

Sir Charles Olcott, baronet, was a by no means prepossessing-looking individual, about forty-five years of age, but being well set up, well dressed and well groomed, he looked much younger. He had all the appearance of the man about town, minus the careless, lackadaisical air which so often forms an attribute of the genus, its place being supplied by a keen sharp briskness which indicated a mind quick to snap at trifles and gauge them at their true worth. His eyes were small and restless, closely set together and seemingly incapable of looking a person straight in the face. The lips were remarkably thin and hard, while the chin was small and pointed. He wore no hair on his face, and that fact seemed to accentuate the many lines by which the countenance was scored, more especially about the mouth and chin. Sir Charles was not a *persona grata* with many; he was considered too clever, too hardheaded, too good a hand at a bargain, but there were others who at times found him useful, and his undoubted influence in certain quarters of the City, in the way of loans and advances, was not a matter to be ignored.

"Then it is Vipán, the explorer?" said Olcott, holding out his hand with a harsh chuckle. He could not laugh—he had never been known to—his nearest attempt was a grating chuckle. "I

heard from Oxendale you were back from Peru. Had a good time, eh ? ”

“ Very, and if you could spare me a few minutes, Olcott, there’s a matter I want your advice on—a very curious affair. I think it may be something in your line, and I meant looking you up, but—”

“ My dear fellow, there is no time like the present. I’m quite at your disposal now. I don’t want to see the show here ; know it by heart.”

“ Then I’ll leave you fellows,” said Mildmay, rising and giving up his seat to Olcott. “ I shall see you again, Vipan. Don’t go flying off without looking me up—”

“ No, no, I won’t, I promise. Good-night ! ” And then, turning to the baronet he said, “ Now, Olcott, order what you like and then, if I don’t bore you, listen to me.”

“ First of all, is there money in it ? ”

“ I think so.”

“ Then I take my oath you won’t ; so fire away,” the baronet replied with the usual chuckle.

“ Very well. As you know I’ve recently been wandering through the Cordilleras of Peru, a spot as rich in metallic treasure as any in the world. Some parts are quite riddled with mines.”

“ Ah, this sounds promising. Go on, my boy, go on ! ”

“ These mines are not all of them recent discoveries. Some of them are hundreds of years old, worked for a time and then abandoned, and now lying in exactly the same condition in which the original miners left them.”

“ But all those worth anything have long since

been taken in hand again. Don't tell me, Vipan. The Peruvian is no fool, you know."

"Where they are known, no doubt, Olcott, but there are others, the very existence of which has been lost sight of."

"There are very few of those, I should fancy."

"Still, there are some. And, supposing I knew of one chock full of copper, do you think it would be possible to form a company to work it?"

"Form a company!" The baronet's little eyes positively twinkled and danced. "My dear boy, you could not have come to a better person than yours truly. Only show me the copper and the title deeds of the property, and we'll have a company out in no time. 'The Queen of the Cordillera'—a big capital, flaring prospectus, with big names on the directorate and a glowing report from a couple of good mining engineers, then the public would be after it like flies round a honey-pot. They love a mine; there are so many possibilities about it. In their eyes, the 'face' is always glittering with ore or diamonds which only require digging out and selling. Oh! there's nothing like a mine to scoop the dollars in with. Country people go for it—parsons, widows with their little all, and so on."

"Well, you think you could manage that part?"

"I should think I could—"

"Then look at this;" and Vipan took from his breast-pocket a leather case from which he extracted a thick envelope bearing a Peruvian stamp.

"I must tell you first of all," he went on, "that when I was out among the mountains I was able

by chance to render a slight service to an old Italian, named Piero Balbi, who had long been settled there, working in the mines, for which he was absurdly grateful, valuing my efforts far above their proper worth. Since my return he has written me this letter. I don't know, Olcott, if you know Italian. At any rate, I have made a translation, a free one, omitting the foreign embroidery, but sticking to main facts. Here's the original and here's the translation."

"Thanks. let me see the translation first ; we can examine the original later." And picking up one of the sheets the baronet read as follows :—

"4 STRADA REGIA,
MOLLENDU, PERU.

"MOST ILLUSTRIOUS SIGNOR PADRONE,—Time does not lessen the feeling of gratitude with which my heart throbs, and I now enjoin that I may be able to give some proof of what I feel. Since I parted from you that morning on the sierra I have wandered over much country, and in one of my expeditions I chanced upon the entry to an old mine, the very existence of which is unknown in the neighbourhood, though I have since found certain records of it among the archives at Lima. Keeping my knowledge to myself, I explored such of the workings as were practicable, and discovered that copper exists in astounding quantities. From records come across, I should say that the mine, when in full working order, was abandoned during the Civil War, of which that Diavolo Pizarro took the opportunity to decimate and almost destroy the old inhabitants. It is perfectly clear that the

mine has never been worked since. There are fortunes in it which only require taking out. But money is needed and money I do not possess. Indeed, I have spent what little I had in partially purchasing the land under which the mine lies. That much I have made safe, at anyrate, for a time.

"If you, most illustrious Signor, would again come out here and meet me, I would show you the mine and convince you that my words are true. Then in London, where money is so plentiful, a company might be formed and the treasure secured.

"But it may be that the illustrious Signor cannot come and, in that case, if he should send anyone to represent him, I have enclosed the half of a leaf of the vichaya tree, retaining the other half myself, and anyone bringing with him that half will be treated by me as though he were the Signor himself. I—"

"I wouldn't read it aloud, Olcott," interrupted Vipan, glancing round at several men and women who were seated near them. "We don't want this little matter to become public property."

"Quite right! quite right! I'm a fool. Never mind. No one can have learnt much so far. But it's best to be careful." And the baronet finished the perusal in silence, and then handed back the sheet to Vipan, saying, "And that's the mysterious half leaf I suppose."

"That's it," replied Vipan, displaying a portion of a faded, green olive leaf with very curious markings on it.

Olcott held out his hand for it, but Vipan drew it back, saying, "No, better not handle it more than necessary; I don't want it damaged, so that it would not fit its fellow half, in case I have to make use of it. There may be thousands hanging to it."

"Right you are! You can't be too careful."

"Now tell me what you think of it all."

"Well, it may be all right, and, you may be in for a good thing. It all depends whether the ore is really there."

"Oh, the copper is there. Balbi would not say it was if it wasn't. He is truth itself."

"In that case the money's there too. We've only got to ask for it. The British public will shell out readily enough. Look here! Are you busy to-morrow morning?"

"Not particularly."

"Then meet me at eleven, at Henry Ellis's office, 203 Coleman Street. He's just the man for us. If it takes his fancy, he can make it go."

"Is he perfectly straight?"

"Oh, yes, very fairly so. In the meantime, I'll think the matter over. Bring all your papers with you and any maps or things you may have, and we'll go thoroughly into the affair." And after a final smoke the two men sauntered out into Leicester Square, Vipan entering a hansom to be driven to his chambers in Ducie Street, while Olcott made his way thoughtfully to his club.

"I've got hold of a soft thing this time," muttered Olcott to himself, as he walked along.

"If I only had that half leaf and Balbi's letter," soliloquised a man who, unnoticed, was walking a few paces behind him.

CHAPTER II

IN THE CITY

THE following morning, Wallace Vipán, punctual to his appointment, called at 203, Coleman Street where he found Sir Charles Olcott and Mr Henry Ellis awaiting him.

"Very proud and glad to make the acquaintance of so distinguished a traveller, I'm sure," said the latter, as Vipán was ushered in. "It is not often we get men of your calibre in the City, Mr Vipán, and we appreciate them when they do come."

"No, I suppose the City has very few attractions for globe-trotters—except Americans to see St Paul's—and yet we have to come to you at times, you see," replied Vipán, cheerily. "But now, let us get to business."

"Certainly, certainly. Our mutual friend, Sir Charles, has given me some little idea of the matter, but I should like to hear your own version and see your maps and documents."

"Of course. I've brought everything with me, I think ;" and taking out a bundle of papers and notes, Vipán drew a chair up to the table in the centre of the big, gorgeously-furnished room which served as Ellis's office. For the next hour and a half the three men were deep in conversation, referring occasionally to the section-sheets of the

map of Peru which Vipan had brought with him. At length they simultaneously drew back their chairs and Ellis said,—

“Well, Mr Vipan, as far as we have been able to go this morning, the idea seems quite feasible, but, of course, it all depends on the *bona fides* of this Italian, Balbi.”

“You need have no misgiving on that score,” replied Vipan. “I have had plenty of opportunities of judging the man, and I would trust him thoroughly. I can guarantee his honesty.”

“That’s good ; in fact, in a certain sense, that is everything. Balbi seems to have put this matter in your way out of pure gratitude, for, of course, he might have gone to a hundred other people who would have made his fortune ; but I cannot see that he makes any stipulation as to his own share in the discovery.”

“He does not ; but you may be very certain I shall see he loses nothing by his generosity and his faith in me.”

“Of course, of course ! Very right and proper,” said Olcott, with a wink at Ellis, which, unfortunately, escaped Vipan’s notice.

“The first thing to be done is to form a small syndicate, then for one or two of us to go out to Peru, obtain absolute possession of the mine and such concessions as we find necessary from the Government, arrange for a good report from some sound mining engineer, and rake in the shekels. By-the-bye, do you know Guelfo — Giuseppe Guelfo ?” said Ellis, rising and pacing up and down the room.

“No, I can’t say I do,” replied Vipan.

"Ah, then you must."

"Is he interested in these matters?"

"He's interested in everything in which there is money. A grand man! Get him on your side and you can do anything. I must introduce you to him. We must have him in the syndicate. Will you come round to his office now?"

"I'm afraid I can't," replied the traveller, looking at his watch. "I'm late already for an appointment. But I'll tell you what—Will you dine with me to-night at my club, the Devonshire, and bring Mr Guelfo with you? We can then have a chat there or go back to my chambers afterwards."

"Thanks, that would suit me, and I think I can answer for Guelfo. He's not a man to let things stand in the way when there is anything good on the tapis," said Ellis. "What time did you say?"

"Oh, eight o'clock, I should think. You'll come too, Olcott?"

"Sorry, but I can't; I have to dine with some friends. You must excuse me. You can then talk it over, and whatever you settle on I shall fall in with."

"Very well. Then till this evening, good-bye, Mr Ellis. Are you coming west, Olcott?" said Vipan, putting on his hat and gloves.

"No, not just at present. I've something else I must see to in the City first. I'll look you up very shortly though."

"All right; so long!" And Vipan ran down the stairs, and, hailing a hansom, directed the man to drive to Mount Street.

• For a few moments the two financiers he had left stood perfectly silent, listening to his depart-

ing footsteps. Then Olcott said, rubbing his hands,—

“Well, my boy, what do you think of it?”

“I think we’ve got hold of as nice a little bit of ‘all right’ as they make, supposing this Italian Johnnie is square. But between you and me, I should have liked it better if Vipan had been out of it.”

“Just my sentiments. He’s troubled with a conscience, an infernally sensitive one. He’d never do in the City. But we can jockey him somehow, or get him so deeply in with us that he must go on.”

“Humph! I suppose he’ll want to go out to Peru to see this Balbi?”

“I should think so, though Balbi has very fortunately prepared for his sending a substitute.”

“Yes, and I think a substitute will have to go. But I’ll talk it over with Guelfo and see what he thinks. Why didn’t you accept for this evening?”

“Thought it better that we should not all appear too hot on it, or he might think he’d got hold of too big a plum.”

“Right you are, Olcott; you’re a careful man.”

While the two financiers were chatting, Vipan had arrived at Lord Oxendale’s house in Mount Street, just in time to join her ladyship and the Hon. Pauline Spencer, her daughter, at luncheon. To these ladies Vipan’s visits were always a pleasure. For years he had been known to them. After leaving Eton, he had spent some time with the clergyman of the next village to Oxendale, who coached him for Cambridge, and Lady Oxendale, a frail, delicate, kindly-hearted little woman

had taken pity upon the solitary young man, and had asked him up to the Hall for any amusements which were going on. And, what he appreciated perhaps more than anything else, she had given him the run of the library, well stocked with books of travel and discovery, in which, even at that time, he revelled far more than in those which would have appealed to most young fellows.

Pauline was then only a child, but a great chum of Vipian's, and together they would sit in one of the deep window-seats of the old library while he read to her accounts of adventures and discoveries in "new" quarters of the globe. But now the old feeling of *camaraderie* had given place to something far deeper and stronger. Vipian and the fair-haired, blue-eyed, beautiful daughter of Viscount Oxendale were lovers in the true sense of the word. Unacknowledged it might be, save by Pauline's mother, who had long since recognised the sterling worth and character of the man and who was content, nay, even happy, that her darling had so firm a stay and support to which to turn in case of need, for, loving woman as she was, she recognised the untrustworthy, selfish and by no means immaculate, character of the father of her child.

Luncheon was over, and as Lady Oxendale rose she said, with a smile,—

"Now, Wallace, I am going to have a rest for an hour or two. I don't feel very well to-day. So I shall leave Pauline in your charge. You can either have the carriage and go for a drive, or sit in the drawing-room, whichever you like, but I shall expect to find you here at tea-time."

"Thank you very much, Lady Oxendale, but if Pauline has nothing she particularly wishes to do, I should much prefer staying quietly here."

"So should I," said the girl. "I haven't heard half I want to about Wallace's last trip."

"Then off you go. I shall tell Briggs to say I am not at home, so you need fear no interruption," and with a kindly smile the delicate woman left the young people alone.

Seated beside his darling on the roomy, comfortable Chesterfield in the drawing-room; Vipian drew glowing pictures of the glory of the Cordilleras, the desolation of lonely, uninhabited "punas," and the luxuriance of the tropical forests, through which he had forced his way by sheer pluck and endurance, and then went on to mention the letter he had received from Balbi and the steps he had taken in connection with it.

"I'm sorry, Wallace," said the girl, when he had finished.

"Sorry! Why, dear?"

"I'm sorry you mentioned the matter to Sir Charles Olcott and his friends. I don't like him. I don't trust him."

"Do you know anything against him, dear?"

"No, I can't say I do. He comes here very often with father, but I have never liked him."

"Well, you see, I don't know many of these City men, and I am a perfect fool in company matters. I thought he would be able to help me. Certainly I might have spoken to your father; he's chairman of—"

"No, Wallace, no! Please don't mention the

matter to father. Promise me," said Pauline, decidedly.

"Of course I won't if you don't wish it. But why?"

"I'd much rather you didn't. I have a feeling I can't describe. I don't know exactly what it is myself, beyond a sensation of some impending evil over this project. Reading this old Italian's letter—what a nice old man he must be, Wallace! I'm sure I should like him—has conjured up a vision of a ghostly race, murdered for the sake of their property, who will rise from their graves, as it were, in defence of what they gave their lives to protect. There are dangers and difficulties in your path, I am sure; you may laugh, but I feel it."

"My dear, I don't laugh, but I think your nerves are a little unstrung. There may be difficulties, but I am ready to face them, for think what this means to you and me. If all goes well, I shall be a rich man, and then—"

"Yes, yes! But is it worth it? I can wait, dearest, I *will* wait. But, oh, I wish you had not undertaken this."

"Darling, you must not give way. I have something here I have shown to no one; a private letter from Balbi which I have kept for your eyes alone. Read it when you are alone and take care of it for me. It might prove useful. And always remember I will do nothing rash."

"I know it, Wallace, but I can't help the feeling which has taken possession of me. I'll keep this for you, dear, you may be sure. But, oh, how glad I shall be when all this is settled."

"And so shall I, for then there will be no more separation, my darling, and if there is any more exploring to be done, we will do it together. I'll let you know how things progress. And now we've talked enough about the matter. Life is not all money-making, is it?"

That evening Vipan's little dinner at the Devonshire was a great success. Ellis had, so he said, with difficulty succeeded in inducing Guiseppe Guelfo to postpone or ignore some other engagements in order to accompany him. The great man—for he was a big man in the financial world of London and the Continent—made himself extremely pleasant. An Italian by birth, a cosmopolitan by education and up-bringing, he spoke most of the Continental languages with equal facility, and, at the same time, his conversation was worth listening to. His offices in Throgmorton Avenue were thronged daily by those who were giving their lives in the race for wealth. He had a similar establishment in the Rue Scribe in Paris, and though there were those who designated both offices as "bucket shops," yet the amount of gold they poured into the pockets of their owner was beyond credence. He was an unmarried man residing in chambers in the Albany, while in summer he lived principally on board the *Ena* his house-boat, on the river. A hulking man, of dark complexion, rapidly growing bald, with a short, pointed black beard and moustache, loud of voice and laughter, with an almost ceaseless flow of conversation, there was no subject he could not talk upon, and at the same time talk well; so the dinner passed off pleasantly

and Vipan was rather agreeably impressed than otherwise with his guest. No word of business had been mentioned, and it was only when they were finishing their coffee and liqueur in the smoking-room that the host said,—

“Now, what shall we do? Shall we go into this business here, or will you come round to my chambers in Ducie Street and talk there? I think the latter would be best. We shall be quite free from any interruption, and I could show you some curiosities I brought back the other day from Peru, which might interest you—but just as you like.”

“Let’s go to Ducie Street, by all means, if convenient to you, Mr Vipan,” said Guelfo. “I’m always interested in that strange and little-known land, Peru.”

“Come along, then,” replied Vipan, and a move was made.

Of the details of the conversation that followed, when, with their cigars alight and their tumblers filled, they occupied comfortable armchairs in Vipan’s rooms, little need be said. The story of Balbi’s discovery and letter was again told, for the benefit of Guelfo who read the original letter in Italian, and the half of the leaf which was to act as credentials, in case Vipan could not go himself, was shown. Guelfo’s questions were numerous and pertinent, but the answers they elicited seemed to produce a favourable impression, for at length Guelfo said,—

“Well, Vipan—I shall drop the ‘mister’ now—
• the thing sounds right, and if you have faith enough in this compatriot of mine to go out and

clinch matters, I've confidence enough in you to accompany you. Of course, it's taking me away from business, but I want a holiday, and we may, after all, be able to put a few thousands in our pockets over the job. So, if you'll go, I'll go with you, and the sooner the better."

"I shall certainly go," replied Vipan, rising and ringing the bell, "and if you will accompany me it might hasten matters." Then as the door opened and the man-servant appeared: "Oh, Hunter, I sha'n't want anything more to-night; I'll see these gentlemen out. You need not sit up."

"Very well, sir."

For some time longer the three men sat talking and smoking, and it was arranged that Vipan should call the following morning at Throgmorton Avenue, by which time Guelfo would have ascertained the date of the sailing of the next boat and particulars of berths, etc.

"You leave all that to me, Vipan," he said; "I'll take the trouble off your hands. All you will have to do will be to stuff your things into a bag and come. And now, good-night. We've kept you up an unconscionable time. No, don't trouble to come downstairs; I think both Ellis and myself are quite capable of letting ourselves out. No, I won't hear of it. Eh, Ellis?"

"Certainly not. We've trespassed upon Vipan sufficiently, I should say."

"Very well, as you like. I certainly am rather tired. Good-night, Mr Guelfo. Good-night, Mr Ellis." And, shaking hands with his guests, Vipan stood on the landing until he heard their footsteps

cross the hall, and the closing of the door. Then, returning to his room, he locked up the various papers and letters with the half of the leaf in his leather despatch-box, and, throwing his bunch of keys into a drawer of the writing-table, he switched off the electric lights and entered his bedroom on the other side of the landing.

The following morning when Hunter entered his master's rooms with his hot water he found there was no occasion for it.

Wallace Vipian lay across the bed, quite dead. He had been strangled by the silken cord of his dressing-gown.

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGERS

VIPAN'S reputation as a traveller was well-known and the news of the tragedy, published in the evening papers, caused a profound sensation throughout London. The books he had published and the lectures he had delivered had caught public attention, and in the Royal and Geographical Societies he had been regarded as a coming man, and great things had been looked for from him. Yet he had been suddenly cut off in his prime—assassinated by an unknown hand.

At the inquest thousands would have liked to have been present where not a hundred could find standing room. But the coroner's court was crowded, and the expectant jury were eager for startling revelations.

James Hunter was the first witness. He stated that he was in the service of the deceased, and identified the body as that of his master, Wallace Vipan. He last saw him alive about half-past eleven on the Wednesday evening, when he entered the sitting-room in answer to the bell, and his master told him that he should require nothing further and that he would see his friends out and he (Hunter) was not to sit up.

"Did you know the gentlemen?" inquired the

coroner, looking up from the paper whereon he was writing the deposition.

"No, sir ; I am not aware that I ever saw them before."

"Are you quite sure the deceased used the word 'friends'?"

The man hesitated, then replied,—

"No, sir ; on second thoughts I believe he said 'the gentlemen.'"

"Ah, please be careful. What next?"

"I sleep right at the top of the house. The next morning I—"

"One moment. These gentlemen had never been in your master's rooms before?"

"No, sir, so far as I know, they had not."

"Very well. Go on."

"The next morning I knocked at my master's door soon after eight, with his shaving water, but he did not answer and, thinking he might be asleep, I entered the room." The witness, who at this point was visibly affected, went on: "The bed-clothes were in great disorder and the body of my master was half on the bed and half off, the head resting on the floor. Round the neck was the waist-cord of his dressing-gown tied very tightly. I took out my knife and cut it at once, but my poor master was quite dead."

"You removed nothing?"

"Nothing except the cord. I ran downstairs and sent for a doctor and the police, and then returned upstairs to see that nothing was touched before they arrived."

"Did you enter the sitting-room?"

"Yes."

“And what did you notice there?”

“That the place had been ransacked. My master’s despatch-box, the cupboards and the drawers in the writing-table were all open and the contents scattered.”

“Can you say if anything was stolen?”

“No, sir, I don’t know what papers Mr Vipan may have had. He always kept everything locked up.”

“Do you know if your master intended making a long stay in England or meditated any other expedition?”

“I don’t, sir. He never mentioned the matter to me.”

The coroner turned to the jury and inquired if they had any questions to put to the witness, but as they had none he was allowed to stand down.

The next witness was Horace John Peacock, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, of Norris Street, Haymarket, who said he was called to the chambers of the deceased about eight-thirty on the morning in question. He found the body as described by the last witness with the exception that the silk cord of the dressing-gown had been cut and removed from the neck. The deceased had been dead for some hours. He had not the slightest doubt that death was due to strangulation, and that the cord handed to him by the last witness had been the means used. He replaced it in the mark in the neck and it fitted exactly; the indentations caused by the twists of the cord and the running knot over the windpipe tallied to a nicety.

"Could death have been self-inflicted?" asked the coroner.

"Most certainly not—this way. It would have been absolutely impossible."

"Did you find any other marks on the body?"

"Yes, a large bruise on the right side of the chest, which was probably caused by the knee of the murderer holding the body of the victim down as he strained at the cord. The pyjama jacket the deceased was wearing had a dirty patch just over this spot."

"Do you consider the last witness did right in cutting the cord?"

"Undoubtedly. He, not being a doctor, could not tell if life were absolutely extinct."

"Now comes our turn," whispered Giuseppe Guelfo to Ellis, who was standing beside him close to the space reserved for the jury. "Be careful and back me up."

The coroner had a short conversation with his clerk and then, turning to the jury, said,—

"Gentlemen, the next, and, as I am informed, the only remaining evidence at present is that of two gentlemen who have volunteered to come forward and say what they know of this very unfortunate affair. Call Mr Guelfo."

"Mr Guelfo, you are, I believe, a financier, and have offices in Throgmorton Avenue, eh?"

Guelfo bowed, and the coroner commenced to write on the official foolscap before him.

"Were you a friend of the deceased?"

"I can hardly claim that honour, much as I should like to, as I only met him that day for the first time. It was in this way. My friend, Mr

Ellis, who is also here to give evidence, knowing I was greatly interested in the travels of the unfortunate gentleman, mentioned my name to him — so I believe — when he himself received an invitation to dine with the deceased at his club, the Devonshire, and Mr Vipan most kindly included me in the invitation. But Mr Ellis will be able to explain this."

"Just so."

"Mr Ellis and I dined with the deceased and afterwards went round to his chambers to smoke and chat, and while there he showed us a number of curiosities he had collected at various times."

"Then this was a mere friendly meeting, not a business appointment?"

"Just so. I am greatly interested in the subject of exploration, and I looked on it as a high privilege to meet so eminent a traveller and to hear some of his experiences and adventures in an informal way."

"Did you remain there late?"

"I think it must have been half-past one when we left, but I cannot be quite sure. I know the time went very quickly."

"Did the deceased come down with you to the door?"

"No, my friend and I would not permit him to do so, though he wished to."

"Did you see anyone in the hall or about the place when you left?"

"No one."

"You closed the door after you?"

"Yes, I pulled it to myself and afterwards

pushed against it to ascertain whether it was secure."

"Did you see anyone in the street near the house?"

• "Not that I remember." •

At this point the foreman of the jury asked the question,—

"In what state, as regards spirits, did Mr Vipan appear to you?"

"In the best."

"Not at all like a man contemplating suicide?" •

"Not in the least; he was bright and animated, and very interesting and entertaining."

"I don't think there is any need to go into that question after the evidence of the doctor, who says it was impossible for the deceased to have brought about his own death," said the coroner shortly, and the jurymen relapsed into silence.

"Can you tell us anything more?" continued the coroner.

"I am afraid not. I only know I left Mr Vipan with the hope of shortly meeting him again and hearing more of his adventures."

"Thank you, then you can—"

"Excuse me a moment, sir," exclaimed the foreman. "You said this meeting was a purely friendly one; there was no business talked?"

"Well, mines and railway concessions, cropped up in the course of conversation, but it was in quite a casual manner."

"Thank you. I merely asked, because I thought that the knowledge the deceased evidently must have possessed of the comparatively unworked

state of Peru might have been very valuable to you in your business capacity."

"Well, sir, if I had half the knowledge Mr Vipan possessed I could turn it to such account that after six months there would be no need for me to spend my life in the City, as I have to."

"Yes, that is just what I thought. I don't wish to ask anything else, thank you."

Henry Ellis, on being sworn, said he was a member of the Stock Exchange and had offices in Coleman Street. He had been introduced to the deceased by Sir Charles Olcott, and had been asked to dinner at the Devonshire by the deceased. Knowing his friend, Mr Guelfo, was very anxious to meet the distinguished traveller, he had mentioned that gentleman's name, when Mr Vipan included him in the invitation.

"You have heard Mr Guelfo's evidence, I believe," said the coroner.

"Yes."

"And do you agree with it?"

"In every particular. I do not think he has omitted any fact worthy of mention."

"You, too, I suppose, were interested in the subject of the explorer's expeditions?"

"Very much so. He showed us many curiosities he had collected."

"Have you had many business dealings with him?"

"None whatever. Not a single one."

"But you were introduced to him by Sir Charles Olcott who is, I believe, largely interested in money matters in the City," said the persistent jurymen.

"I was. But Sir Charles was a very old ac-

quaintance of Mr Vipan. He had known him for years."

"Very well," and the juryman bent his head towards his neighbour and whispered something in his ear.

And so the inquiry went on, the only other evidence of any interest at all being that of the police, with regard to the state of a window on the staircase which gave on to the roof of an out-building. It had been found unlatched, and the bottom sash raised a fraction of an inch, but whether it was in that condition the previous evening could not be ascertained. It might have been. It very often was left partially open. Neither Mr Guelfo nor Mr Ellis, who were recalled, was able to throw any light upon the points. They had taken no notice as they had descended the stairs.

After a short discussion between the coroner and the police inspector as to an adjournment, the former summed up, and the jury, after a short deliberation, returned an open verdict of "Murder by some person or persons unknown." And Guelfo and Ellis left the court.

"That's well over," said the former, when they had proceeded some distance citywards.

"Yes, poor beggar, I'm sorry for him," said Ellis. "He was a real good sort and as innocent as a lamb."

"I'm a great deal more sorry for myself," replied the financier, with a grunt. "We had a Bonanza in our hands then, Ellis, and now someone else has got hold of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you fool, what do you suppose Vipan was murdered for? For fun, eh?"

"No, robbery I should imagine."

"Yes, robbery of a letter and the half of a withered leaf."

"Nonsense, no one knew about it. At least, very few, I should think."

"Never mind; someone's nailed it. And that's why I was so careful in my evidence to steer clear of the matter. We don't want all the world to know about that mine."

"But you don't think there is any chance of getting a finger in the pie now, do you?"

"Can't say. Curious things happen now and then, and there are few things in the mining world that don't in some way come to my ears. At any-rate, no one will gather from our evidence that we were biting."

While this conversation was taking place as they drove in a cab along the Thames Embankment, another was being held in the bar of a public-house in close proximity to the coroner's court. The duties of the British jurymen always appear to promote thirst, and the sequel to any inquiry, whether before judge or before coroner, is generally an adjournment to the nearest licensed house.

"Don't you tell me that man, Guelfo, and his hanger-on, Ellis, only dined with that poor young Vipan for what they could put in their mouths!" the persistent jurymen was saying to two of his *confrères* as he stood sipping his glass of hot spirits. "It ain't in the nature of Guelfo. I happened to know him. It's the pieces he's after

always, and those he'll get *some way* or another."

"But, Mr Taft, you don't suggest that those City nobs murdered the deceased?" hazarded one of his companions.

"I suggest nothing," said Mr Taft.

"Or that they robbed him?"

"No, I don't—not then. But I reckon—and mind you, I know what I'm talking about—young Vipan, if he had lived another six months wouldn't have asked those men to dine with him again at the end of the time."

"Then you didn't ask those questions just to hear your own voice, Mr Taft?"

"Not me. In my business I find the less I say the better it is."

"I never can quite make out what your business really is, Mr Taft. You're a bit of a cabinetmaker and a bit of a goldsmith and a bit of—"

"Now, look here. I'll tell you what my business is; then you need not bother your heads over it any more. My business is my own—there! Now, will you have another drink on the strength of it?"

Mr Taft's two companions smiled weakly, as men who had been rebuked and had no answers ready on their tongues in reply.

"Well," said one, "the police may find—"

"The police!" replied Mr Taft, in a tone of the most supreme contempt. "The police won't do nothing in this case. They're all very well in a street row, but this is something beyond them. Them as are mixed up in this know a bit more than the police, and if anything comes to light, it

won't be through the blue-bottles. But if you won't have any more, come along! I must get back to business. Serving on juries every day will soon bring a man to the workhouse."

And then the three men parted.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH PAULINE TAKES ACTION

WALLACE VIPAN had been laid at rest in St George's Cemetery out at Ealing. The man who had braved danger and death in a hundred forms in various quarters of the globe, and had come through them unscathed, had at last found his grave in a crowded suburban burial-place. Already his name and fame were beginning to fade from the public mind, but not with all. Though he might have been described as a man without a single relative or connection, there was one heart at least that was bowed and stricken to the dust by his terrible and tragic end.

Pauline Spencer's love for Wallace was not the conventional and highly-respectable liking which unfortunately nowadays so often does duty in Society in matrimonial affairs. It was something far deeper, far more solid, an affection founded on the firm basis of regard and admiration of those qualities she had known from her early girlhood.

Pauline mourned her lover and her secretly-affianced husband with true heartfelt sorrow. His death had been a shock that had shaken her nature to its very foundations, and had left her prostrate and a shadow of her former bright self. But together with her grief there was borne in

upon her another feeling—a determination to discover his murderer, to bring to justice the hand that had not only robbed her young life of all sunshine but had deprived her country of one who would have added to its honour and lustre.

This feeling was hardly one of revenge—at least, it did not assume that aspect in her own mind—but rather a desire to do what she felt was her duty to the dead man who had committed his heart and devotion to her keeping. It was something she owed his memory, something she would do her utmost to repay.

The grief of Pauline was very quiet in its intensity. She made no outward hysterical show. She lived her life much as she had done previously during those long periods when her lover was so far away waging his silent war against the difficulties and secrets of a jealous Nature. But it had left its traces plainly marked on her fair young countenance, and anyone seeing her talking quietly in the drawing-room at Mount Street to her dearest friend and school-fellow, Dora Colvin, the daughter of Colonel Colvin, whose property adjoined that of Viscount Oxendale's, would hardly have recognised the girl who, but a week or two previously, had been regarded as one of the brightest of the season's beauties.

"No," Pauline was saying, "I won't come out with you to-day, Dora. I hardly feel up to it. Besides, I'm expecting Gerald Mildmay to call; but of course you know that," with a faint smile, for the engagement of Gerald and Dora was already public property.

"Yes, dear, I remember. And when he comes

"I'll retire, for you will have business matters to discuss."

"They will be nothing you may not hear, my dear, and as Wallace has made Gerald his executor you will know as much about the matter as he does."

"No, no, Pauline; Gerald is very reliable in that way. He doesn't ever chatter about business, and it was only at your request that he told me Mr Vipan had left you all he had."

"Call him Wallace, please, Dora. He was Vipan to the world—to me he was Wallace."

"Certainly, darling, if you wish it. You will like having his things, I am sure."

"I shall love having them round me; they will seem to be a part of himself now he has been taken from me," and the poor girl's voice faltered. But with a strong effort she conquered herself and continued, "I thought of asking Mr Mildmay to—"

"Call him Gerald, Pauline."

"Very well. I think I may; he's a very old friend. I thought of asking Gerald to take me to Wallace's chambers this afternoon before anything is touched. If he can, will you go with me?"

"Of course, dear. If I can help you in any way you've only to ask me."

"I have spoken to father about it, and I am going to have the furniture taken out of my room and replaced by Wallace's things. Some people might think it a morbid idea, but I don't feel it so. So many of his possessions are the records of his exploring trips, and though I did not accompany him, yet I shared his journeys with him, in a

manner, for we talked them over and arranged all his plans together before he started."

"Of course, of course. There never were two people more bound up in each other's ideas and intentions than you and—Wallace, I think."

"You noticed that, did you, Dora? For really it was so. There was some sympathy or affinity—I don't know the proper term for it—between us, I am certain. I always, even when he was thousands of miles away, seemed to be cognisant of any danger or difficulty he was encountering. I used to talk to him of this when he returned, and by comparing dates we found I was generally right."

"How curious! I've never noticed that with regard to Gerald and myself, but then he certainly has not done the things that Wallace did."

"And the very last time I saw him I had a presentiment of evil and spoke to him about it. It was all vague and uncertain, and I could not tell from what quarter it threatened, but I felt it was there."

"And, Pauline, have you experienced anything of the same kind since—since he was taken? I mean as to who did it? For the police seemed utterly at sea. They haven't found a single trace."

"No, nothing definite. But I have the feeling that some day I shall know and be able to lay my hand on Wallace's assassin; and, strangely enough, it is accompanied by no sense of horror or feelings of revenge. It is only as if I should be doing something for my darling."

Just then the door opened and the footman announced Gerald Mildmay.

After mutual greetings—and Gerald was very

quiet and gentle towards Pauline—the girl asked him if he could spare the time to accompany her to the dead man's chambers.

"Most certainly, Miss Spencer. I should be very glad if you would come, for I should like your directions regarding one or two things."

"Are they really mine already, Mr Mildmay? I mean, are all the legal matters settled?"

"Yes, Miss Spencer, I have obtained probate this morning, so you are now in actual possession to do as you like. The various shares and securities will be transferred to your name, and I should like to know to what bank you would wish me to pay the cash poor Vipan left."

"To my account at the London and Westminster, if you will be so kind, Mr Mildmay. And I don't know how to thank you sufficiently for all you have done for me. I am more grateful than I can tell you."

"Miss Spencer, I can't say it was a pleasure, because of the loss we have sustained, but I felt I would do it rather than anyone else. Vipan and I were such very old friends, and it would have seemed almost sacrilege if anyone else had gone through his papers and things."

Later in the afternoon the three friends found themselves in the rooms lately occupied by the dead explorer. It was one of the hardest trials that Pauline had been called upon to endure, but she faced it bravely, and though the various little things lying about brought her great loss more vividly to her mind than ever, beyond a slight • hesitation on first entering she did not give way. For a time she was busy with Mildmay, giving

directions as to the removal of the furniture to Mount Street, and then said,—

"Now, Mr Mildmay, I want to see Wallace's papers."

"They're in his drawers, Miss Spencer. There are the keys. I have had to go through them, of course, but they were in an awful state of muddle, for that—that—someone had ransacked everything, and—"

"Yes, I know, Mr Mildmay, but did you come across a letter in Italian, signed 'Piero Balbi'?"

"I don't remember seeing it." *

"It would probably have a portion of the dried leaf of a tree with it."

"Then I'm sure I didn't. All the papers I came across I put most carefully together."

"Then don't trouble about it. But would you mind making them up into a bundle for me, and I will take them back with me to Mount Street. I wish to go through them myself. I feel certain some of them have been stolen."

"Certainly, Miss Spencer." And as Gerald moved the mass of papers and documents from the drawers Pauline stood close beside him, watching. As he lifted the last bundle something fell and rattled on the bottom of the drawer. The girl bent forward and picked it up. It was one half, together with the opened link, of a shirt-cuff fastening. She glanced at it a moment and then, without saying a word, wrapped it in a scrap of paper she found on the floor and placed it in her pocket.

The examination of the bedroom in which Vipan had met his death proved even more trying to Pauline than the inspection of the sitting-room, but

she faced it bravely, and after giving certain directions as to the furniture she said to Gerald,—

“I will have all Wallace’s clothes sent to Mount Street. And—and—have the police taken that suit of pyjamas he was wearing?”

“No, I had them put away, just as they were.”

“Send them with the other things.”

“But, Miss Spencer, would they not be—?”

“Send them with the other things, please,” replied Pauline, quietly and firmly. She was standing beside the fireplace as she spoke, and her eyes happened to fall on a little carved bowl formed from some kind of small gourd, and ornamented by a pattern rudely burnt on the outside. In it were a lot of odds and ends—pins, bits of tie-fastenings, the half of an old railway ticket, the voucher for a stall at the Haymarket Theatre, and a portion of a sleeve-link and other odds and ends which collect in a bachelor’s bedroom. Without making any remark, Pauline wrapped up the ornament with its contents and put it in her pocket. Then, returning to the sitting-room, she said,—

“Now, Dora and Gerald—for I am going to call you Gerald for the future—I want you both to choose anything you like as a memento of the one we have lost. I wish you to have something, because I know he would have liked it; he was so fond of you both. So do not hesitate.”

With many expressions of thanks the selections were made, and shortly afterwards Gerald saw Pauline into a hansom, with her large bundle of papers, while he and Dora walked to Bond Street, where the young lady had some commissions to execute for her mother.

For some days afterwards Pauline was busily engaged going through the papers which had been found in Vipan's rooms. It was a painful task for her, for she was continually coming across notes and memoranda which they had made together when planning some of the trips. Carefully preserved did she find the letters she had written him when he was far away, and the books of notes and diaries he had kept during his expeditions.

The last of these, dealing with his South American trip, she read with the deepest interest—an interest which was centred upon something more than the mere record of his daily progression. She constantly came across the name of Piero Balbi, but in no case was there an address given in connection with it. Vipan had evidently had Balbi as his companion during a portion of the time he was in Peru, in the neighbourhood of Cuzco and Lake Titicaca, but there was no indication beyond this as to where Balbi was to be found. Not a trace remained of the letter containing the dried half of the vichaya leaf Wallace had shown her. It had vanished altogether, and Pauline felt it had vanished for a purpose and had not merely been lost.

There was another thing missing, and that was a crocodile-skin letter-case with silver corners and "W.V." worked into a silver monogram on one of the sides, which Pauline had given to her lover some years previously, and which she knew was in his possession the last time she had seen him. Vipan had been very careful of it, and it had accompanied him on all his expeditions.

It was while she was thus engaged one day that

a footman informed her that a man of the name of Hunter wished to see her.

"I expected him. Show him into the library. I will be down directly," she said; and, taking the broken portions of the sleeve-link, she shortly afterwards descended the stairs.

"Good-morning, Hunter," she said on entering the room. "I sent for you to show you these, found among Mr Vipan's papers. Have you ever seen them before?" handing him the pieces.

"Never, miss. They're not my master's—poor Mr Vipan's, I should say," replied the man, having carefully examined them. "He wouldn't wear anything like this!"

"I thought not. Do you know if the police saw them?"

"I don't fancy so. I heard nothing if they did, and they took away everything they fancied might be of use to them. Those are of foreign make, I should say, and very common at that."

"You knew most of the jewellery in Mr Vipan's possession?"

"All of it, miss. I don't think he had a thing I didn't know. You see he had not much—he didn't care for it. But what he had was the best."

"Very well, but don't mention this matter to *anyone*."

"No, miss, I won't."

"And have you got a fresh situation?"

"Not at present, miss."

"If you should require any reference, be sure and apply to me. I think I should be sufficient."

• "I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, miss. It has been a terrible time to me, for never did a

'servant have a kinder or a better master than him who's gone."

"I'm sure of that, Hunter, and I want you to accept this as if it were from him. He always spoke so highly of you." And Pauline handed him an envelope, which, on opening afterwards, he discovered contained a note for £50.

"Thank you very much, miss, but nothing will ever make me forget him."

"I know it, Hunter. Leave me your address, in case I should wish to communicate with you."

After a little further conversation the valet left, and as Pauline crossed the hall she stopped and was about to enter the dining-room, when a footman said,—

"His lordship is in there with a gentleman, miss."

"Do you know who it is, William?"

"A Mr Guelfo, miss. I've never seen him before."

"Guelfo! Surely he won't get hold of father?" gasped Pauline as she turned away and quietly ascended the stairs.

CHAPTER V

DESCRIBES A CURIOUS "DEAL"

GIUSEPPE GUELFO sat busily engaged in his palatial offices in the Rue Scribe in Paris.

It was early in the day and the mass of letters by the morning's delivery lay before him unopened. Three of his chief clerks sat on the farther side of the table from him, waiting with their notebooks beside them. As he opened a letter he quickly glanced over its contents and tossed it to one or other of them, at the same time hurriedly giving instructions as to the answer to be sent or the proceedings to be taken with reference to it.

Occasionally he would lay a letter aside which he deemed worthy of his personal attention. There was method in all he did, otherwise he would never have been able to cope with the enormous mass of business which came to him, nor would he have been the magnate in the world of gold he was at that moment.

At length the pile of letters disappeared or was subdivided into four heaps, three with the clerks and one on his right hand, while two of the men rose and remained standing, waiting for any further instructions he might have for them.

- "You can go," he said shortly, and then turning to the remaining clerk he conversed rapidly with

him in fluent French on some dealings in South African mines, mentioning sums which would have staggered any ordinary individual bent on endeavouring to make something out of Bulls or Bears. At length he added,—

"I think that is all for the present, Jules. You know how to act so don't trouble me any further about it."

"The directions of m'sieur are quite clear."

"Anybody waiting?"

Guelfo pressed the electric button let into the right-hand arm of his chair, so placed that his hand rested in a perfectly natural manner upon it and he could manipulate it without anyone sitting in front of him being aware of what he was doing. Three times he pressed it. The first time sharply, then holding it down for a few seconds, and the third time again sharply, and waited. Almost immediately came the reply in the form of eleven distinct strokes on a bell.

"Humph! quite a crowd of them to-day, Jules. Go and weed them out and only send in those who look like money."

"*Oui, m'sieur,*" said the man, bowing and departing as Guelfo, without losing time, commenced re-reading the letters beside him.

In a few moments there came a knock at the door, and, in answer to his "*Entrez,*" there entered a rich Paris merchant.

"Ah! good-morning," said Guelfo, just glancing up from the sheet he was perusing. "What for you, M. Nanon?"

The merchant commenced asking a series of financial questions. Guelfo went on with his

reading until there came a pause, then he said, "All you wish to know, M. Nanon, Jules can answer quite as well as I can. Ask him. Good-morning!" And resting his hand on the arm of his chair a faint tinkle was heard and the office door opened to admit a well-dressed lady, as the Frenchman, seeing nothing could be gained by waiting, retired.

"Your servant, Madame Piton. What is it—a further advance?"

"Well, Mr Guelfo, I hoped that—"

"Have you brought the securities with you?"

"Yes, I have some scrip here of the—"

"Then see Pierre; he manages these little affairs. He is quite my right hand, madame."

"But, m'sieur, I should—"

"Quite so, madame. He will doubtless be able to oblige you. He is a most kind-hearted young man. Good-morning!" With a "Bah!" and an expressive shrug of the shoulders the lady flounced out of the room only to give place to another client. And so the stream went on until, instead of a visitor, Jules appeared again—

"Pardon, m'sieur, but there is one—a man—desiring to see you. Who he is I cannot make out. I fancy he has some information which might be worth your attention, but he will divulge nothing to me."

"I'll see him. Here, take these letters; I have noted in pencil the replies to be sent."

"Bien, m'sieur!" And Jules disappeared.

In a few moments the door again opened and there entered a thin, undersized man wearing blue glass pince-nez. His face was clean shaven, but

the hair on his head, a dirty yellow, was cut short and stood up bristling. He glanced round the room in a furtive manner as he made his way to the table.

"Well, what is it, my dear sir?" asked Guelfo, regarding him curiously and without appearing to do so, taking in his every peculiarity. "You wish to make an investment? Fortunate man! You have come to the right shop."

"No, sir, I have no money," he answered, speaking English with an accent.

"Then you have come to the wrong shop." And Guelfo's hand sought the arm of his chair.

"Stay a moment, m'sieur. Though I have no money I may have that which is worth it—and worth a good round sum," he remarked mysteriously.

"I doubt it. I don't deal in that kind of thing. What is it—jewellery, diamonds, what? Come, I have no time to spare."

The man took no notice of the financier's impatience. "I suppose anything I may tell you will be treated by you in strict confidence."

"Of course, of course. Secrecy is one of the fundamental rules of my calling," said the Italian, feeling greater curiosity than he allowed to be seen. There was something about the man which had caught his attention.

"Then I may speak openly to you?"

"Perfectly openly."

"And if we are not able to do business, what then?"

"Then I forget all about the affair—everything."

"Mind I am not asking these questions for my

own sake. I have nothing to hide. I ask for the sake of a friend."

"Yes, yes, set your mind quite at rest and let me hear what you have to offer."

The man hesitated a moment or two longer, then drawing an envelope from the breast-pocket of his coat he took from it some papers, and selecting one he pushed it across the table to Guelfo. Wonderful as was the self-command of the man of iron nerves, he had the very utmost difficulty in not betraying himself as his eyes fell upon it.

It was Balbi's letter to Vipan.

"What is this?" he asked in as careless a manner as he could assume. "May I read it?"

"Of course; I brought it for that purpose."

"Yes, and is your name Vipan?" asked Guelfo, when he had been through the letter.

"No."

"Where is this Mr Vipan? Who is he?"

"He is the great English explorer. You haven't heard of him?"

"No. Why doesn't he come himself to see me?"

"He is dead," the man whispered; "that is why he doesn't come. That is why I come in his place."

"Oh, he's dead, is he? Well, what do you come for?"

"I come to sell you that letter."

At that moment Guelfo did three things. He burst out laughing, he tossed the sheet of paper back across the table, and he pressed the button in the arm of his chair twice—a signal which, being uncoded, read, "On no account disturb me." "My good friend, do you take me for a born idiot?" he asked.

"On the contrary, I take you for a very hard-headed man, who knows the value of a good thing when he comes across it. Read it again."

"Mere waste of time. There is some nonsense about half a leaf or something."

"Here it is," he answered, exhibiting the half of the vichaya leaf Guelfo knew so well.

And so the talk went on for some time, a verbal duel in which each sought to get the better of his adversary, at the same time knowing he was not fighting with honest foils himself. But Guelfo's was the master-hand, and he knew that in the end he must win. With him it was merely a question of by how much. At length he said,—

"Since this man Vipan is dead, how comes this letter into your possession?"

"I am holding it for a friend."

"How did your friend get it?"

"I can't say; I don't ask questions. He doesn't like them."

"Who is your friend?"

"He doesn't wish his name known."

"Well, all I can say is that this is the most astounding instance of cool cheek I've ever come across. Impudence is far too weak a word. Here's a fellow—Heaven knows who!—has obtained a private letter—Heaven knows how!—relating to something—Heaven knows what!—sending someone—who, by-the-bye, hasn't given his name—to endeavour to sell that letter for what he can get. A pretty story, isn't it?" and Guelfo rose from his chair and walked to the fireplace.

"Then," said the man, picking up the paper and

replacing it in the envelope, "you won't buy it? Well, no harm has been done."

"No, no harm has been done except my time has been wasted, and I don't make money like that. By-the-bye, what is your name?"

"Since we are not going to do business there is no need to tell you."

"Quite right; you're a cautious man. I like cautious men. What are you asking for that letter?"

"I ask nothing. My friend asks five thousand pounds."

"Does he? I wish he may get it. Five thousand pounds for an off-chance!"

"There's no off-chance about it; it's all right, I know."

"Oh, *you* know, do you? I thought you were only acting for a friend," retorted Guelfo, raising his eyebrows.

"So I am, but I happen to know more about the value of this paper than he does."

"Have you ever been in Peru?"

"I have."

"A most interesting country, I understand; most interesting for those who have money behind them, a most infernal hole for those who have not."

"Ah, you might be able to give me some information respecting a railway out there which I have been looking for. Have you a few minutes to spare? I am quite ready to pay for what I get."

"Certainly; anything I can tell you I shall be very glad to."

From that moment the relations between the

two men altered. The antagonism vanished and they talked as friendly business men might be expected to. Very skilfully Guelfo played his "fish," although that "fish" saw the "hook" the whole time while he pretended not to. From the railway the conversation circled round to mines, and from mines to the letter which was resting snugly in its envelope lying on the table.

Guelfo feigned to deride it. His visitor seemed to accept his view of it, but all the time held stoutly to his point. At length, without going closely into the intricacies of this verbal fence, the point of conversation had narrowed down to the question of price.

"I'm not going to buy a pig in a poke," said Guelfo, "though I am always ready to pay an honest price for what is of use to me."

"No one wishes you to buy a pig in a poke. Satisfy yourself by every means in your power of the genuine nature of my offer. I can trust you. Between us there must be a certain amount of confidence."

"But I don't know this man Balbi. There may be no such person."

"But there is, and you may as well take my word as that of any other man. Vipan saved Balbi's life at the risk of his own, and the man's gratitude is unbounded. There is nothing he would not have done for Vipan in return. And this is the first opportunity which has occurred and he has seized on it."

"You know that?"

"I know it of my own personal knowledge."

"But the price you are asking is absurd."

"Some people would think so. I don't."

"I won't give it."

"Very well, there is no more to be said. There are others who will."

• "I mean I won't give it all at once, down on the nail," the Italian said, altering his tone.

"I don't ask you to. Give me one thousand now and the remainder when the mine is in your hands."

"No, I don't mind five hundred now, and, if the report of my mining engineer proves satisfactory, another five hundred on the completion of the purchase."

"Never! I won't listen to it."

And so the argument went on, first one abating a little, then the other springing a few hundreds, until both men, wearied out with wrangling, arrived at a point at which they were more or less agreed, and the letter, with the half of the vichaya leaf, which had already cost one brave man his life, was transferred to Guelfo's private safe, and its place in the visitor's pocket taken by a cheque to bearer for seven hundred and fifty pounds.

"And now," said Guelfo, returning to his chair, having locked the safe door, "you may as well give me your name."

"I have no objection now. I am Hans Reichardt."

"Thank you, Herr Reichardt. And what is your permanent address?"

"It is hard to say. But letters addressed to me at 254 Old Compton Street, Soho, will always find me, wherever I may be."

"And when you are in Paris?"

"I sha'n't be here long. I am returning in a few hours. I don't like Paris, and Paris—well, the truth is, Paris doesn't like me. But before I leave I will look in on you in case you wish to say anything. That is all, I think," and Reichardt rose to leave.

"All for the present that I can think of. But don't come here too often, and, above all things, don't chatter; if you do, I shall be sure to know, and then not a penny more of my money will you see."

"Look here, Mr Guelfo. From this time forth you and I are in the same boat. If one goes under, the other goes with him; we sink or swim together. And as I have no desire to lose my liberty just at present, you may depend upon me to be careful. Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon. I won't ask you to lunch with me; not that I should not enjoy your companionship, but the less we are seen together the better it will be for both of us."

As soon as the financier was alone—and it was not for many minutes, for by this time the outer office was crowded with clients—a smile of satisfaction came over his face, and as he rubbed his hands together he muttered,—

"A good morning's work, Giuseppe—as good a morning's work as ever you did. The game is now in your own hands. A word from you and Herr Hans Reichardt would dance upon nothing, and you don't know that he sha'n't. You must think it over."

CHAPTER VI

THE SIGN OF THE PENTAGON

IT was on the morning following the interview between Guelfo and Reichardt that Henry Ellis, when he arrived at his office at nine o'clock, found a wire from Paris awaiting him with his usual batch of correspondence. Tearing it open he read the words, "June Roses." To the outside world these could convey but little, and even to those in his office they would have proved a puzzle. But a glance was sufficient to give Ellis a clue to the mystery, and, going to his private safe, he took from it a small manuscript book and searched its pages for a few seconds.

"Ah!" he muttered, "'Come instantly.' I wonder what Guelfo has got hold of now. It must be something good, for he has used our strongest words of summons." Again he searched the small book and then filled up a telegraph form: "'Guelfo, Rue Scribe 19 bis, Paris.—Dandelion.' There—'Am leaving immediately.' That should do," he continued, as he rang his office-bell. "Send that off at once," he said, handing the form to the boy who answered the summons, "and tell Mr Blake and Stephens I want them."

• "Yes, sir."

In a few moments the latter entered his office.

"Go as hard as you can to my house, tell my man to put up things for two or three days in Paris, and meet me with the kit-bag at Ludgate Hill, in time for the eleven-o'clock train ; and mind you're there."

"Yes, sir," and the boy left the room.

"Ah, Mr Blake, I'm summoned to Paris and shall perhaps be away two or three days. You will have to get on without me as best you can."

"There will be no difficulty, I think, sir," replied the keen-faced man who had entered the room, arrayed in orthodox Stock Exchange get-up, with the blue and white badge of the authorised clerk in his button-hole. "There is nothing very important just now, and I suppose you will be back in time for settling-day."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. I have an hour to spare, so let us go through these letters and then if there is anything that you want to know you can ask me."

"Very well, sir," and drawing a chair to the table the clerk and his employer were for a time deeply engaged, Blake occasionally making notes on a sheet of paper.

The afternoon boat from Dover carried Mr Henry Ellis to Calais. The Channel was not kind and, being a bad sailor, his state on arriving alongside the French pier was anything but a happy one. He walked slowly to the door of the buffet, where a crowd of more fortunately-constituted travellers was snatching a hasty luncheon, but shook his head sadly and turned away to the Paris express. Selecting a first-class carriage, he took his seat in it and made himself

as comfortable as his terribly upset interior would permit.

At Amiens he had somewhat recovered and was able to enjoy a cup of tea, and by the time the train drew up in the Gare du Nord he was practically himself again; and hailing a porter he had his bag conveyed to a cab and gave directions to the *cocher* to drive to the Rue Scribe.

"Yes, M'sieur Guelfo is still within," was the reply to his inquiry, and the next minute he found himself in the presence of the great financier, his more or less master, within his luxuriously-furnished sanctum.

"Well, Ellis, this is all right. I like despatch, as you know; nothing like it in business."

"No, you're right, and I thought from the wording of your wire you had got hold of something good, so I put everything else aside and started at once. And now what is it?"

"Ah, my boy, what is it, do you think?" and the great man smiled contentedly as he leant back in his comfortable padded office-chair and rubbed his hands.

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed Ellis. "You always seem to come across the bonanzas somehow or other. It appears to me things drop at your feet for you to pick up while other poor devils have to go groping about for a living. What is it now? Tell me. Remember, I have been kept on thorns ever since nine o'clock this morning and have suffered such a shaking-up in that accursed steamer that I'm nothing more than an empty skin bag at the present moment."

"A little choppy, eh?" asked Guelfo, putting off

answering Ellis for the enjoyment of teasing him.

"Choppy! But there, for goodness' sake let me try and forget it if I can. It was too horrible. You ought to have something good to make up for it."

"And perhaps I have," said Guelfo, rising and going quietly to the door, which he opened suddenly.

"Only as a matter of precaution," he said, crossing the room to the big iron safe from which he took a small bundle of papers, "though I think it is hardly needed now. I have weeded and filtered my staff; there is only a reliable deposit left. What do you think of that, eh?" placing a letter before Ellis.

"Good heavens, man!" gasped the stockbroker, turning pale, "why, this is the very letter Vipan showed us."

"The very same."

"How did you get it?"

"My dear Ellis, in this matter you will find it by far the best plan to take things on trust and ask no questions," said the other, quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. There is the letter: it is *my* property."

"Is it? I am not quite sure on that point. I rather fancy in law it belongs to Vipan's representative."

"Well, for all practical purposes I am he."

"And the half of the leaf that went with that letter?"

"There it is," said Guelfo, exhibiting the faded

and dried piece of Nature between the folds of a piece of soft tissue paper, but not suffering it to leave his hands.

"Then you have all that is needful, I suppose?"

• "Yes."

"But how did you get it?"

"My dear Ellis, remember what I said. I am sure it will be better for both of us if you do. Vipani may have entrusted it to my care. It may have been given to me by his servant. The police may have handed it to me, or it may—well, there are thousands of channels," and he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Don't speak of channels to-day; it is a painful subject," interrupted Ellis, with a sickly smile.

"Ah, that's better! *You* think of what *is* to be done, not what *has* been done."

"And what is that?"

"Well, in the first place, you and I are going out to Peru straight away. We shall hunt up this compatriot of mine, Balbi, buy him out of the affair, obtain the necessary concessions, and then come back to England and float the 'Queen of the Cordilleras.' And if we don't make our pile we are not what I fancy we are."

"And I'm to be in it?"

"Of course you are—on terms. You and I will work this show together. You mentioned it to me first of anyone and I'm not ungrateful. I don't think you ever have found me that, Ellis?"

• "Certainly not. You never have been. Still, I should have liked to have known a little more about it if you could have seen your way."

"But I can't," replied Guelfo, slowly. "If you have any qualms of conscience or doubt as to carrying the game through, say so at once and no harm will be done. If not, I will offer you a share in this 'spec.'—for it is a spec. at present—in return for your help. Remember this, Ellis: the kernel of the affair"—slapping with his hand Balbi's letter lying on the table between them—"is mine, *mine*, and I can take what steps I please. Think it over, man. I don't want to rush you. Only, whatever decision you come to, stick to it. I've got a little matter I must see to before we shut the office, so you won't mind my leaving you for a short time. I'll give orders no one shall bother you," said the financier, rising and locking the papers away in the safe and then taking down his hat.

"Thanks, I don't know that it requires much thought, but I'll just go over the matter quietly and give you my decision on your return."

"Right you are, my dear fellow. So long!" And Guelfo left the office, closing the door carefully behind him.

Henry Ellis was not a thoroughly hardened individual, and for a City man he was moderately honest. He would not rob a fellow-creature openly; his standard of morality forbade that. But the ways of the City, or, in other words, "business," had told upon him, and if a good thing came in his way, without being too particular as to the nature of that good thing, he was quick to snap at it. His association with Guelfo had not improved him, save financially. It had blunted his early ideals and had taught him that money was

everything and that how it was obtained was the second consideration.

As he thought over his friend's proposal, the idea of making a fortune out of it loomed very large, almost blotting out the fact that the discovery of the murderer of the man who had treated him in the most friendly manner and given him his confidence might depend on the very secret Guelfo possessed. True, the discovery could in no way benefit the dead man. Nor could he, had he lived, have done anything without their aid. They had, at the time of his death, formed a partnership as it were, and now that he was gone it was only as if he had withdrawn, leaving his companions to share the benefit.

It was with such specious reasoning as this that Ellis did battle with his better nature, and as is, alas! so often the case, evil triumphed, and when Guelfo made his appearance he was greeted with,—

"Well, Guelfo, I've gone over the matter carefully and I see nothing against it. I'm with you hand and glove."

"Stop a minute," replied Guelfo, who, if a villain, was a brave and hardened villain, "you're telling me a lie first off. You're not such a blind fool as not to see anything against it. There is plenty against it. You know that if Vipan were alive we should not be in the position we are now; there would be three in it instead of two, in the first place. Then I don't say I am, but I may be able, at this moment, to put my hand on the murderer of Vipan. But who's going to pay me for doing so, and surely my services are worth

something. And I never work for nothing. I've made a position where there's no need that I should. To cut a long story short, though I shall be very glad to have you in this, Ellis, I'm not going to have you flattering yourself that you're a better man than I am. We're both rogues, more or less, and in this affair we'll be on the same table or not at all. Do you still say 'Yes' now I've put it plainly to you?"

"You have put it plainly, brutally plainly, Guelfo, and it isn't pleasant hearing. There may be some fractions of truth in what you say, but, taking everything together, I don't think I should be justified in saying 'No.' So I shall hold to my decision, and there's my hand on it." And the over-persuaded and weak-willed man sacrificed his conscience to the lust of gold.

"That's all right. Now you will understand I am not going to answer any questions regarding the letter and the leaf. The matter, as far as you are concerned, commences as from to-day. Anything before that is my business and I can stand the racket of it."

"Quite so. But when we have found this Balbi it may be awkward, may it not?"

"Bother! Who is Balbi? Probably a half-educated Italian miner who has spent the greater portion of his life underground and whose wits are as blunt as his drills after a day's work. If you and I can't manage him we deserve to be kicked. I'm Italian myself, you know. But you need not trouble about that at present. We shall have several weeks on board ship, removed from all bothers and worries, and we can settle our

programme then. In the meantime, what you have to do is to get back to London, arrange for your absence, get your kit together and book berths for us two. And whatever you do, keep your mouth hermetically sealed as far as Vipan and Peru are concerned."

"Just so. But with all deference to you, the first thing I have to do is to get some dinner; I'm positively starving."

"Sorry I can't give you an invitation. I'm kept here, I find. But I'll meet you afterwards, say at nine, at Olympia, if that will suit you. You're not going back to England to-night?"

"Not if I know it. My skin and bones alone wouldn't be of much use in Coleman Street, and that's all that would reach there if I attempted two crossings the same day. Then, till nine o'clock." And Ellis left the sanctum as Guelfo turned to a pile of letters requiring his signature.

As Ellis passed through the outer office he saw all the clerks were busily at work and gave no indication of shutting up, and in the hall of the palatial suite he noticed two men entering.

"I wonder where he got that letter from?" he muttered, gazing at the faces of the men as they passed. "If I only knew it would mean something to me. I wouldn't play second fiddle then. He's got hold of it since he's been here, I'm pretty sure. I'd like to shadow him for a day or two; I might find out something. But it's too risky. You never know where he wouldn't have you. He's got fellows in his pay all over the place, and a rare lot of clients too, it seems," as a poorly-clad man with a clean-shaven face and wearing pince-nez

passed him as he emerged into the street. The man was raising his handkerchief to his face at the moment and cast a rapid, half-shy glance at Ellis as he passed him.

"That's a bad face!" muttered Ellis. And then, glancing back through the glass panels of the door, "And he's one of Guelfo's flock too, it seems;" as the man entered the financier's office. "He doesn't look as if he had much money to bless himself with."

Ellis hadn't taken two steps on the stairs when he trod on something. Stooping down he picked it up and found it was a piece of hollow wire in the form of a pentagon. He gazed at it a moment, hesitated, and then quickly re-entered the offices and went straight into Guelfo's room, and throwing open the door said,—

"Did you say eight or eight-thirty this evening, Guelfo?"

"Neither," replied Guelfo, looking up from his letters. "Nine sharp; I can't get there before."

"All right, thanks; I'll be there." And then, as he re-crossed the clerks' office, he casually glanced at the three men who sat waiting, and once more in the street he muttered, "That may be one to me. Who knows?"

CHAPTER VII

WHICH CONTAINS A MYSTERY

GUELFO was punctual to his appointment that evening at Olympia and found Ellis waiting for him, apparently in a far more comfortable bodily condition than when he had seen him a few hours previously, for he had dined well at Vian's in the Rue Danou and his mid-day discomfort had faded from his mind.

Together they sat smoking and drinking, occasionally glancing at the performance and chatting over general matters. But their conversation was frequently interrupted by people coming up to greet Guelfo, who seemed to be well known in that haunt of Parisian frivolity.

"You're well known here, Guelfo," said Ellis, after a time.

"Oh, yes. you see I've got a bit of a name and—Excuse me a moment," and the financier rose and walked away into the crowd.

Ellis watched him and saw him speak to the man wearing blue pince-nez whom he had noticed some hours previously entering the office in the Rue Scribe. The conversation was clearly not an amicable one from the expression the two men wore. Guelfo's face had a determined look, while his companion appeared sulky and dissatisfied.

But the financier evidently got the better of the argument, if argument it were, for with a shrug of his shoulders the man turned away and was lost in the throng as Guelfo, with a smile on his face, returned towards his seat. Ellis, who had also risen and moved some few yards in order to catch his friend's proceedings, had time to regain his chair before Guelfo joined him again.

"Did you see that fellow?"

"No," he replied with a ready lie.

"A man I shall have to squeeze. He's for ever worrying me for tips and good things, as if I had nothing in the world to do but to put folk up to making money. But he won't trouble me again, I fancy, after the jacketing I gave him just now. Let's have a drink."

"No, Guelfo, I'm off. I'm a bit tired and want a good night's rest. Remember I've to face that infernal Channel again to-morrow."

"Then you won't stay another day and see something of Paris?"

"Can't, thanks. The sooner I'm back the better. I've got a lot to do before I can get free. I'll see to all arrangements for you and let you know the date of sailing. When shall you be back in London?"

"In a day or two. Send me a wire and I won't keep you waiting. Shall I see you to-morrow morning?"

"I think not. I shall go by the early train, but you can write me if you have anything to say. I open all letters myself. Good-night." And the two rogues parted company.

The following day proved exceedingly fine,

without a breath of wind, and when Ellis arrived at Calais his heart was gladdened by the peaceful appearance of the sea. On this occasion there was no need for him to hurry along to secure a private cabin. He felt quite equal to remaining on deck, and in a spirit of derision of the powers of Neptune he walked up and down with an unconcerned air, and after a time, feeling no threatening of evil to come, went so far as to light a cigarette.

The boat was carrying a large number of returning tourists, and owing to the exceptionally fine weather the deck was crowded. In his walk Ellis's eyes fell on the figure of a man seated in a deck-chair in lee of the funnel. Something about his appearance caught Ellis's attention and, turning in his walk, he passed him again. Yes, he was certain now. He was the man wearing blue pince-nez who had entered Guelfo's office as Ellis had left it on the previous evening, and who afterwards had had a conversation with the financier in the music-hall.

The man was deep in the *Petit Journal* and had not raised his eyes.

Ellis continued his somewhat demonstrative march, and at length the man looked up when the two were opposite each other, but he betrayed no sign of recognition. He cast a casual glance at Ellis and returned to the perusal of his paper. There appeared to be nothing amiss with his eyesight now. The blue glasses had disappeared, and he held the paper at the ordinary distance from his face.

Could the glasses have been used merely as a means of disguise and not from necessity? It

seemed almost as though it were so, and this supposition gave birth to another in the mind of Ellis. Could the man before him have been the owner of the mysterious badge or symbol which he had picked up the moment after their first encounter? It might be so. At any rate, it could not have been dropped many moments, for there was considerable traffic up those stairs in the Rue Scribe.

Ellis was feeling absolutely light-hearted from his present immunity from *mal-de-mer*, and in a spirit of mischief, more than anything else, he made up his mind to try an experiment.

Taking the article from his pocket he toyed with it as he walked, tossing it up and catching it again in an apparently careless, thoughtless manner, yet, as he passed the reader, keeping one eye on him.

Twice had he passed without the other taking any notice. The third time he was endeavouring to turn the paper inside out and glanced up. He gave a perceptible start and dropped the paper on to his knees. Ellis continued his walk, whistling softly in a careless manner to himself. When he returned he noticed the deck-chair was empty, and on reaching the limit of the promenade deck he found the man standing there. There was an expression on his face that Ellis could not fathom, and he was taken aback when the man, looking straight into his eyes, uttered the one word,—

“Solomon!”

“I beg your pardon,” replied Ellis. “Solomon? No, that is not my name.”

“Ah, I have been deceived;” and then, after a

moment's hesitation, "You are very like a friend of mine. I must apologise."

"No need to, I'm sure. They say every man has his double."

"Yes—and yet—"

"What a glorious day!" continued Ellis, ignoring his companion's evident uncertainty.

"Yes, we're fortunate. We don't often get a crossing like this."

"No, indeed. It was very different yesterday."

"Ah, you cross often! You do not mind bad weather?"

"Don't I? I hate it. It always knocks me over. I never come unless absolutely obliged."

"So? Paris is almost as busy a place as London, and many people are compelled by their business to be as much in one as the other."

"That is so," replied Ellis, "but there are other cities which are almost as busy, from a business point of view, for Englishmen as Paris—Marseilles, Lyons, Bordeaux and others." He saw the man was endeavouring to pump him, and he thus drew a red herring across the trail. On his part he was anxious to ascertain if he had been recognised in Guelfo's office, and therefore continued the conversation. But though he continually found the man eyeing him intently, Ellis felt convinced he had escaped recognition.

The conversation continued on general subjects, but Ellis was quick to notice that his companion introduced certain quaint phrases and expressions, that must convey hidden meanings to those who had a key to them, and that demanded specific answers—answers he was unable to give, and

before Dover was reached he was strongly confirmed in his idea that his possession of the metal symbol, which his companion had caught sight of, had led him to believe that he, Ellis, was a member of some association to which his companion also belonged. But whether this talisman had been lost by the man or no, Ellis could not determine. Both were very much on their guard.

When they embarked and Ellis, bag in hand, was walking up the gangway he found that his late companion was following him closely and eyeing his luggage to ascertain whether there was any name or address on the label. And later, at Charing Cross, just as he was entering a hansom, he caught sight of the man lingering near.

"No. 3, De Vere Gardens, Kensington," he said to the driver, in a voice loud enough to reach the ears of the listener; and it was not until he was half way down Piccadilly that he pushed up the trap door and changed the direction to Sussex Place, Regent's Park.

"There," he muttered to himself, as the cab turned up Bond Street and he glanced through the side window and saw that no other hansom or growler was following, "I've thrown him off completely. I fogged him on the boat and the odds are he'll spend a good portion of to-day wandering about De Vere Gardens. Much good may it do him. He got nothing out of me and, for the matter of that, I didn't get much out of him. It was fortunate I removed my direction ~~from~~ my bag before starting. I wonder now, where I could ascertain the meaning of that

thing I picked up. Scotland Yard might be able to help me, and yet I hardly like to go there. It might lead to inquiries which Guelfo would not like. There's nothing that I can see to be learnt from the design," and he felt in his pocket to examine it once more.

"By George! it's gone!" he exclaimed, withdrawing his hand empty. "That fellow must have got it as he crowded on me coming up the gangway of the boat."

Thus thinking, Ellis was driven up Baker Street, across the Marylebone Road, through Upper Baker Street and was just about to enter Regent's Park when a shout from the driver caused him to raise his eyes, and he saw, to his intense horror, a lady on a bicycle almost beneath the horse. A big black collic was tearing along beside her and snapping at her feet and dress. Her face was ghastly pale, and so engaged was she endeavouring to escape the animal that she had not observed the further dangers into which she was running. The moment she did so, she gave her handle-bar a violent wrench and swerved out of the horse's way, but in doing so seemed to lose her balance, for her machine skidded and she came down heavily on her shoulder and side, with the dog growling over her.

Without waiting for the cab to stop, Ellis, who fortunately had his walking-stick in his hand, sprang out and dealt the brute a heavy blow. This partially stunned the animal for, leaving the lady, it spun round once or twice and then rolled over on its side, motionless.

By this time the lady had freed herself from her

machine and was endeavouring to rise. Ellis offered his hand, saying,—

“I trust, madam, you are not hurt? Allow me to assist you.”

“Thank you very much,” she gasped breathlessly. “No, I don’t think there is much amiss. It was very stupid of me. I was so engaged with that horrid dog that I never observed the cab coming through the gates. I shall be all right in a few minutes, only it gives one rather a shake coming down in that way,” with a faint smile.

“Of course; of course! It’s a mercy you were not killed. Now, if you will just get into my cab and drive to my house, not many yards away. I will follow with your machine, and you can rest quietly there until you feel quite recovered.”

“I’m very much obliged to you, sir, and if it is not giving you too much trouble I should—”

“No trouble at all. Take my arm, if you will so honour me,” and very gently Ellis helped the lady, who had grown strangely white, into the hansom, and directing the man to drive slowly, turned and raised the bicycle which beyond a bent pedal had sustained no apparent damage. After a sharp word or two to the flashily-dressed owner of the dog, who had come up and was anxiously bending over the slowly-recovering brute, Ellis followed the cab and arrived at the door in time to assist the lady to alight.

“This way, madam. You will be quite quiet here, and I will send my housekeeper in case you should want anything,” said Ellis, leading the way into a small room off the hall cosily furnished as a study, and immediately retreating.

The lady was glad to be able to rest quietly on the comfortable sofa, for her fall had affected her more than she cared to admit. Nor did she refuse the glass of sherry and a biscuit brought her a few minutes later by the severely-dressed, elderly woman, who introduced herself as Mr Ellis's housekeeper.

"Mr Ellis! Is it Mr Ellis, the stockbroker, to whom I am indebted for this kindness?" asked the lady.

"Yes, madam, my master has his offices in Coleman Street, and is a member of the House. He was just returning from Paris when he was fortunate enough to be able to render you this little assistance."

For a while the two chatted together and then, as the housekeeper was preparing to leave the room, the lady said,—

"Is your master still in the house?"

"Yes, madam."

"Would you kindly tell him I should like to speak to him?"

"Certainly, madam."

A few minutes later on Ellis entering he was greeted with the words,—

"Mr Ellis, I feel quite myself again now and wish to thank you before leaving for the great kindness you have shown me."

"Don't mention it, madam. Pray, don't mention it." And he gazed on the fair face before him, lost in admiration.

"My father, Lord Oxendale, will, I am sure, wish to thank you in person and will call"

"Lord Oxendale! Then it is Miss Spencer who has honoured me?"

"Yes, that is my name."

"I am indeed fortunate. I have had the pleasure of meeting your father several times in business."

And thus commenced an acquaintance which had a serious bearing on the events hereafter to be recorded.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN BALBI

SOME weeks later the mail steamer *Milesia* had ploughed its way across the Atlantic, round Cape Horn and up the Pacific, until at the port of Mollendo on the arid, rainless coast of Peru, where it had landed two of its first-class passengers, Guelfo and his satellite, Ellis.

The voyage had been uneventful, and as soon as the stockbroker had acquired his sea-legs and was able to appear on deck, many had been the consultations and discussions held by the two.

Before they had embarked Ellis had met Pauline several times, and the fascination she had exercised over him that afternoon at his house in Sussex Place had steadily grown. Lord Oxendale had called on him and had insisted on his dining at Mount Street and making the acquaintance of Lady Oxendale. This first visit had been followed by one or two calls, in which Ellis had been able to impress her ladyship greatly in his own favour. There was no doubt about it, Ellis was a man who shone in Society. He was a gentleman, well read and of a cultured mind, knowing how to display his knowledge to the best advantage.

But with Pauline it was different. She merely

regarded him as a man who had rendered her a service and to whom it entailed her being civil. Moreover, she knew that Ellis had, though it was only for a few hours, been associated with the man to whom she had given her love in a matter which she regarded as the cause of his death. Indeed, in her eyes, there was a cloud of suspicion hanging over Ellis. She felt she might be most unfair to him in thus viewing the matter, but, nevertheless, she could not shake off the curious feeling, and never once, when in his company, did she refer to her dead lover or seek any information as to what had taken place between the two men.

Nor was Ellis himself at his ease. He admired Lord Oxendale's daughter immensely, and recognised that this admiration was rapidly giving place to a stronger feeling. But at the same time he felt what a mean, despicable traitor he was.

He would have given much if he had never met Vipian and more if he had not entered into that fatal compact with Guelfo, which was daily pressing more heavily upon his soul. A great fight was going on within him—a fight between honour and dishonour—and he was miserable. Money with him came first, and Guelfo was his stream of Pactolus. It was this man who brought him his wealth ; without him Ellis would be poor, and he could not afford to break with him. He had entered into a compact and he must go through with it, weakly comforting himself with the thought that something might occur which would enable him to cast off the bonds which had, in the light of love, commenced to gall him so bitterly.

And so the two, one a hardened cold villain, the other a weak coward with some grains of a better nature still lying dormant within him, set sail on their search for the riches to which they had no vestige of right.

During the voyage they had carefully arranged their plans, or rather Guelfo had laid them down and Ellis had fallen in with them. Removed from the influence of Pauline he had given himself over more fully to his tempter, and was now determined to carry the thing through without hesitation.

At Mollendo, on making inquiries for Balbi at 4 Strada Regia, the address upon the letter, they were informed that he had left there some time previously for Cuzco, in the centre of the country, where his letters were forwarded to the Hotel Pizarro and where further information regarding him would doubtless be obtainable.

"There! What do you think of that, Ellis?" exclaimed Guelfo, in a tone of disgust. "I suppose we're going to have a game of follow-my-leader all over this infernal, dried-up country."

"Well, you didn't suppose you were going to drop on to him all in a second, as though he had an office in Old Broad Street, did you?" replied Ellis, laughing. "We've come a considerable number of thousands of miles and a few hundreds further won't matter much; so let's make our way up to Cuzco as fast as we can. They have got a railway there; that is something to be thankful for."

"You're keener on the game than you were, Ellis, I notice," said Guelfo.

"Well, we're getting close up now, and that might be the reason."

On the following day the two men were in the cars crossing the twenty miles or so of sandy waste which lies between the sea and the western foot of the Andes—that strip of land on which rain never falls, but which, from June to November, is watered every morning by the *garra* or thick, damp fog—and thence up the steep ascent to Arequipa and from there through the marvellous passes and cañons of the giant Andes, where the line seems to hang on the sides of the precipices more like the thread of a spider's web than anything else, until the glorious lake of Titicaca, bosomed in a giant hollow, fringed on all sides by lofty, snow-capped mountains, was reached.

Here at the city of Puno a pause of some hours was made and then a further ascent was commenced, past Pucara and Santa Rosa into the defiles and gorges of the Vilcanota Mountains, until at length, after long hours of snail-like progression, they emerged on the high tableland of Cuzco and noticed that the rivers were now flowing in a contrary direction to those they had passed earlier in the day. Though the district is described as tableland, yet its appearance gives anything but that idea to the traveller, for the surface is very uneven, being traversed by several ridges or hills, and the city of Cuzco itself nestles at the foot of the lofty hill of Sacsahuaman.

But at this time the physical appearance of the country had little interest for Guelfo and Ellis, and when at last, weary and travel-stained, they drove from the Cuzco railway station to the Hotel Pizarro, they positively loathed mountain scenery and awe-inspiring cañons.

Their first inquiry was for Balbi. They heard that he was staying at the hotel, though, at the moment, was away at a village a few miles distant, but was expected back the following day.

"Come, that's better!" exclaimed Guelfo. "It really looks as if we had run him to earth at last."

"Yes, I don't think we can be far from him now, and I'm glad not to have to meet him to-day. One must be a little off-colour after such a blazing hot and tiring journey as we've had. A good night's rest and I shall be double the man I feel at present."

"Well, you don't look particularly frisky just now, Ellis. A child could bluff you into anything."

"You're right, my boy, you're perfectly right. Therefore, as I said, I am glad to lie low for the present."

The night's rest did wonders for both men. They rose refreshed and alert, and the invigorating nature of the mountain air—for Cuzco lies 11,300 feet above sea level—was already being felt by them. They got up late, having given orders on their arrival that when Signor Balbi returned he was to be at once informed that two gentlemen from England were waiting to see him.

Ellis and Guelfo had had their mid-day meal and were sitting smoking and chatting in the shady *patio* of the hotel with its open trellis roof of green creepers, when a small, dark-skinned, bright-eyed, black-haired man entered the quadrangle from the house and cast his eyes all about until they rested on the two Englishmen. Then stepping towards

them he removed his sombrero with a sweep, saying in broken English,—

“Gentlemen, you wish to see me?”

Both men sprang to their feet and at the same moment exclaimed, “Signor Balbi?”

“Yes,” replied the little man shortly, with his piercing, dark eyes riveted on the face of Guelfo with an intense look of surprise and indecision, which he did not withdraw for some moments.

“Very glad to meet you, Signor Balbi,” said Guelfo in Italian, in a hearty, half-jocund, manner, extending his hand which the other did not notice or ignore. “We’ve come a long way to find you.”

“You are from England?”

“Yes, all the way from London.”

“And Signor Vipan—is he not with you?”

“Alas, no; he could not come. So he sent us to represent him. We have our credentials with us which we will show you in good time. In the meanwhile, let us have a talk.”

All this while Balbi’s eyes had remained fixed on Guelfo’s face, totally ignoring the presence of Ellis.

“Your names are—?” asked the Italian.

“This is my friend, Mr Henry Ellis, of Coleman Street, London, and I am Giuseppe Guelfo of Throgmorton Avenue, in the same city, the Rue Scribe, Paris, and various other places, as necessity or business may require.”

“Va bene!” muttered the little man beneath his breath, and turning away from them without another word he strode to the farther side of the *patio*, and furiously marched up and down muttering to himself.

"Odd, isn't he?" said Guelfo, surveying him with surprise. He spoke in French.

"Very! Is he quite mad?" replied Ellis, in the same language. "We'd better take no notice. Something has upset him. Perhaps we did not address him with sufficient formality. These men are very punctilious."

"But he isn't a Don. He's Italian—a countryman of my own. I'll soon make it all right with him. He'll come round. Take no notice." And the two travellers resumed their seats and continued chatting as though nothing had happened.

It was a quarter of an hour later that Balbi, having apparently recovered himself, approached them and said,—

"Signori! I must offer you my apologies. I doubtless appeared to act very rudely towards you just now, but such was far from my intention. The fact is I was terribly disappointed at finding my old friend, Signor Vipan, had not come, as I had been looking forward with such pleasure to seeing him again, and in my disappointment I forgot myself for the moment."

"No apologies, signore, pray. We can quite appreciate your feelings, and I may tell you that they were shared by your friend when he discovered that circumstances would prevent his return to Peru. He always spoke of the great pleasure it would give him to meet you again."

"Ah, the Signor Vipan was a man after my own heart, a man whose word was his bond, a true man and a firm friend. He was well when you saw him last?"

Without a moment's hesitation Guelfo replied,—

"Quite well. His journey over the Continent had done him no harm. He had had great difficulties, but came through them all right, and the very last time we saw him he spoke with enthusiasm of his projected return to Peru at a later date, and his regret at being unable to accompany us on this occasion."

"Ah! the signor is a man who dearly loves travel and adventure. For him no difficulties are too stupendous, no dangers too great. He is a grand man."

During the conversation the eyes of the little Italian were rarely removed from the face of Guelfo. He watched the man as a cat watches a mouse. Of Ellis he appeared to take little notice; his attention was concentrated on the financier. And Ellis, in his turn, while taking little part in the conversation, watched the face of the Italian closely and endeavoured to read his character. But he failed. He could not come to any definite conclusion regarding him.

"And you had a pleasant journey here?" continued Balbi.

"The voyage was all right after the first few days," said Ellis, joining in. "But I can't say much for your railway system; it's too slow. I admit, though, that some of the scenery we passed through is magnificent."

"I shall be able to show you some equally as fine during your stay, Signor Ellis, if you care for that kind of thing," said Balbi.

"I suppose this discovery of yours, Mr Balbi, lies among these mountains?" said Guelfo, anxious to get to business at once.

"We will leave that matter for a later time, if you have no objection, Mr Guelfo. At present we have to make each other's acquaintance, as it were."

"True, true! And you will want to see our credentials and satisfy yourself as to our *bona fides* no doubt."

"It is but business, signore."

"Certainly, certainly. We shall get on well together, Balbi," said Guelfo, dropping the prefix, which the Italian was quick to notice. "You're a man of business; so am I. But, at any rate for to-day, we'll give pleasure the first place. Are you engaged this afternoon?"

"I am quite at your service, signori."

"Then I would suggest that, if not inconveniencing you, we should have a carriage, if such things are to be had in this country, and you should show us some of the marvellous ruins about here we have heard talked of."

"They are well worth seeing, signori, and I shall be delighted. You are now in the very heart of their country, and when we return you will do me the honour of supping with me."

"No, indeed. That honour rests with us, Signor Balbi," said Ellis. "Your part shall consist in acting as cicerone and you must allow us to play the hosts."

"So be it, signore. I go to order the carriage." And Balbi left the two Englishmen.

"He's not such a bad sort after all," remarked Ellis in French, little knowing what was passing through the mind of their new acquaintance at that very moment.

The afternoon was spent by the three among the

ruins of a past age, examining the remaining traces of that highly-cultured, mysterious race which had fallen a victim to the Spaniards' lust for gold.

The excursion was an interesting one to the Englishmen and was continued till the shades of evening had fallen. During the supper, which afterwards was taken beneath the green roof of the *patio*, Balbi gave them many interesting details of the vanished race, and displayed a small collection of gold ornaments and relics, which he had either found or purchased during his stay in that district.

The trio retired early, but when Balbi reached his room his nature seemed to alter at once. He threw off the mask he had been wearing during the latter part of the day and gave himself over to the passion which was burning in his soul.

"Diavolo!" he muttered hoarsely to himself, as he strode up and down his chamber. "At last we have met! At last I have him in my power!" He went to a drawer and, unlocking it, drew out a long, slender, triangular poignard, an old Florentine weapon of the middle ages, and felt its edge, still almost as keen as a razor. "No," he muttered, replacing it, "it would be too swift, too painless. He shall suffer as he has made others suffer. His flesh is nothing. He is but a pig, a dog! Dio! It must be at his heart, his soul, that I shall bite and gnaw. He shall feel the tortures of the damned before I hold my hand." And then, after a pause, "But the Signor Vipan—is he his friend? He cannot be, yet I must be certain of that first, for the signore is *my* friend, and never by deed of mine shall anything of his be harmed."

Guelfo," and he spat on uttering the name, "shall even go free for his sake. But we shall see. I have waited and I can wait still, and vengeance grows in the keeping;" and he smiled grimly as he replaced the keen weapon in its old sheath of stamped leather.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRACK OF THE "SHARKS"

It would be but wearisome to record the many interviews and meetings, discussions and bargainings which took place between "Giuseppe Guelfo of the one part and Piero Balbi, called the vendor, of the other part" (for Ellis did not figure by name in the agreement) for the sale and purchase of the copper mine to which the financier had decided to give the name of "The Queen of the Cordilleras," as having a particularly attractive sound.

Business arrangements are never very attractive to those who have no personal interest in them. Suffice it, therefore, to say that, on the day following their first meeting, Guelfo had produced Balbi's own letter and the half of the vichaya leaf which had been enclosed and which was found to fit exactly on to the portion retained by the undersized Italian miner, who, to all appearances, seemed quite satisfied. After further interviews had taken place, the amounts to be paid as purchase-money been settled, and, with the aid of a lawyer, an agreement had been drawn up and signed, Balbi drove with the two Englishmen to Larco, some few miles distant from Cuzco, where, hidden amid the hills above the village, the entrance to the mine was situated.

More for form's sake than anything else, they followed Balbi into the dark workings and heard his explanation of the various cuttings, levels, adits and passages, most of which seemed half-choked-up with debris fallen from the roof. The mine was really there, they could vouch for that, but whether it was really workable or contained ore in paying quantities was a question for the mining experts whom they engaged to examine and report on it, at the same time throwing out a strong hint that the better the mine was discovered to be the better it would be for the experts.

At length all arrangements had been made, contracts signed, and, after no inconsiderable bribery of government officials, the concessions had been obtained and Guelfo and Ellis were about to leave Cuzco for Mollendo, there to take boat for England and give the British public the opportunity of participating in the wealth lying hid in the depths of "The Queen of the Cordilleras."

The men had finished their evening meal and were sitting smoking in the *patio*.

"By Jove! I shall be glad to get out of this; I've had quite enough of Peru," said Ellis. "But it was worth coming for: we've got hold of a real soft thing, I'm convinced, and there's nothing like being in a position to be able to say you've seen the property. It really ought to go."

"Go! It'll go like blazes. I'll get a real good man to write the prospectus, a fellow who can rub it in thick and knows how to describe scenery and all that. I'm not going to spare money over this job. The game's worth the candle. As it is I've been shelling out pretty heavily already. The

mining experts had the impudence to suggest to me that they usually worked on the reciprocity plan; the better the pay the better the reports provided. And then the way those government robbers required their palms greased was horrible. They have no conscience in Peru. But, after all, what does it matter? I shall see my money back. I am not going to pay for all this. Giuseppe Guelfo knows a dodge worth two of that. When he wants money he goes to the great, open-handed, confiding and childish British public, and because he asks them they are only too anxious to give."

"It really is so," said Ellis, laughing; "the people believe in you in the most marvellous way. By-the-bye, Balbi surprised me."

"In what way?"

"I should have thought he would have wanted more."

"So he did, but he didn't get it. He'd no fool to deal with in me."

"No, that's right enough. But why would he not take part payment in shares? I didn't think that looked as if he had much belief in his property."

"Said he didn't understand such things and would rather have the dollars. I didn't mind. I gave him less. And, if it comes to that, I'll put some down in his name just as a bait for the public. Don't you worry yourself; we've done with him. He'll be quite content with what he's got, and will spend his life grubbing about here until he gets killed in some of these holes he's always exploring. He's no business man; I soon found that out.

Vipan and Balbi are now wiped clean off the slate and Giuseppe Guelfo takes their place. He's eaten them up, devoured them—d'you see? They are no more."

"Then it's a good thing for us."

"It is a good thing. One of the best we've got hold of, my boy. You wait till we get back to London and see how I will work it. Now, let's have another drink and we'll give our minds a holiday till we see the City again. They deserve it. They've worked hard enough of late."

"Right you are! I'm quite agreeable." And no more was said on the matter.

Next afternoon Ellis took a walk by himself into the country to one of the massive blocks of ruins which still remained as monuments of the building and engineering skill of a forgotten race, those marvellous builders who, in the dark ages, had from somewhere learnt how to trim ponderous masses of rock into mathematical exactitude and raise and lay them as truly and correctly as the most highly-trained masons of modern times. He was deeply interested in these relics of the past, and much of his spare time had been given to visiting and examining the many which were still to be found round Cuzco.

At length, somewhat wearied with his walk, he turned into a small *posada* by the wayside, and sitting down in the cool, stone-walled public-room—what in England we should have designated the bar—he called for a flask of the wine of the country, and lighting his pipe he proceeded to rest himself.*

He happened to glance at the wall against

which he leaned, and started violently, for there, not a yard away from him, roughly scratched on the smooth surface of the stone, was the figure of the pentagon surrounded by the circle, while beneath it was the one word, "Larco."

The attendant approaching at that moment with his wine, he pointed to the sign and asked, in the best Spanish he was capable of, what it meant.

The girl smiled, looked at it and with a shrug of her shoulders said it was nothing; only some nonsense some visitor had drawn. Yet Ellis did not pass it over so lightly. It had given him a shock. It was so odd that this symbol, which he had only once seen before, and then on the opposite side of the world, should here figure on the wall of a country inn. And the word "Larco" beneath it was the name of the village in which lay the mine which was the object of their long journey.

Could it be that the man he had first seen in Guelfo's Paris office and later on board the Dover boat had been here, before them, also on the track of Balbi and his property? Ellis was puzzled and far from feeling completely at ease. It was an enigma, the solution of which he could not grasp.

The girl, evidently amused at the visitor's curiosity, returned with the landlord of the establishment and pointed out the mark to him. He looked at it intently for a few seconds and then, without uttering a word, left the room.

Ellis sat for some time over his wine and when he felt rested prepared to leave. At the door he

encountered the landlord, who, taking off his sombrero, said,—

"The senor was interested?"

"Yes," replied Ellis; "it was a curious mark."

"It is not a good one," replied the man, apprehensively. "I will have it removed. I did not know it was there!"

"What does it mean?"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders and answered, "It is not good. My house is respectable. It should not be there."

"Do you know who traced it?"

"How should I? I am not always in the room."

"I have seen it before, cut out in metal."

"Ah! was it in Cuzco?"

"Cuzco! No; the other side of the world—in Paris."

"Then let the senor beware. It bodes no good to have seen it. Beware!" he added, holding up his finger.

"Look here my good man," said Ellis, becoming excited and lapsing into English, "you're hinting at a lot of things and telling me nothing. Just say what you really mean straight out and don't be so infernally mysterious."

The man, who had not understood a word of the harangue, smiled, doffed his sombrero again and disappeared into the house without another word.

Ellis stood waiting a few moments to see if he would return, and then turning away he muttered to himself, with all the egotism of a true-born Britisher, "What foolishness it is these foreigners not knowing English!"

The following day Guelfo and Ellis, who had

from the first maintained a strict silence as to the mysterious symbol, left Cuzco for Mollendo, accompanied on their journey to the coast by Balbi who had business at the port. When they embarked the old fellow accompanied them on board and bade them farewell there.

As he was being rowed back to the shore he waved his sombrero to them and muttered to himself between his teeth,—

“You may think yourselves clever and take me for a fool. But it is not so. Piero Balbi knows his own. He has got what he wanted, and now he can go to the great London and find the Signor Vipan who was not afraid to risk his life for a poor companion and who now shall— Ah, well! we shall see. Giuseppe Guelfo,” and as he uttered the name a look of terrible ferocity came into his eyes and he clenched his teeth till they ground together, “his money is his life. Through his money I will strike. Lucia! Lucia! you are not forgotten! He shall suffer as you and I have suffered. He shall pay his debt to the last fraction.”

It was some days after this that, while walking near the harbour, he met a man whom he had not seen for months, and who, after greeting him cordially, remarked,—

“Have you been to the post-office since you returned here, Balbi?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“There’s a letter there claiming an owner. It is addressed to Piero Balbi, but the rest is so vague it has not been delivered.”

“Is that so? I expect nothing. Is it from Italy? Has it an Italian stamp on it?”

"I don't know. I did not look particularly, but I think it was an English one."

"Thank you. I'll go and ascertain." And parting from his acquaintance Balbi made his way to the post-office. Yes, there was a letter within the glass frame addressed :—

Signor [•]PIERO BALBI,
Cuzco.
Arequipa. Mollendo.
Peru.

The envelope was dirty, frayed and travel-stained and bore the postal stamps of the three towns named, together with note in pencil and ink made by numerous postmen stating their inability to deliver it on account of insufficiency of address.

Balbi applied for it, declaring that he had been recently travelling, and had had no fixed address for some time, but that in all probability it was intended for him. The postmaster raised numerous difficulties about handing it over and required proof of his being the person whose name was inscribed upon it.

At length, however, after some delay, Balbi was able to satisfy the authorities, and the letter was handed over to him.

Without waiting to leave the office he tore the envelope open and, turning the sheet over, read the signature, "Pauline Spencer." A puzzled look came into his face, and he gazed at the paper without attempting to read the contents.

"Pauline Spencer! Pauline Spencer! Where have I heard that name before?" he muttered.

“Well, my good man, is it not for you after all?” asked the official. “You seem in doubt. Had you not better read it?”

“Yes, yes!” and he glanced at the sheets. The first sentence, in rather ungrammatical Italian, was sufficient.

“13a MOUNT STREET,
LONDON, W.

“SIR,—Whether this letter will ever reach you is very uncertain, as I have no means of knowing your address beyond what I can gather from entries in the diary of the late Mr Wallace Vipar—”

“The late! Ah, I knew it!” Then with a catch in his voice. “Yes, signore, the letter is for me and contains the saddest news I have ever received.” And thrusting it into his pocket, Balbi left the office, and it was not until he was in the solitude of the room he rented that he continued the perusal.

“—for,” the letter went on, “I regret to say Mr Vipar was murdered very shortly after his return home, the motive for the dastardly crime being perfectly apparent to me to whom he was betrothed and to whom he confided all his prospects and intentions. I feel certain, from what Mr Vipar has told me about you, that his terrible death will be a sad blow to you, of whom he was extremely fond. At present his murderer has not been discovered, nor can I find any trace of your letter and enclosure among his papers, although he showed me the former the very day before his death, and then assured me he had shown them to

very few. A second enclosure you sent is in my possession, and has been seen by no one else. In case you should ever come to England, pray see me, as it would give me the greatest pleasure to meet one who was so highly esteemed by him so dear to both of us. I may tell you that I have also something which might lead to the discovery of his murderer, but which at present I am unable to make use of.—Trusting this may find you,
yours very truly, PAULINE SPENCER."

That very evening the mail-bag for England contained the following letter:—

"STRADA REGIA,
" MOLLENDO.

"SIGNORINA,—Your letter has reached me. I leave for England at once. At present I cannot speak of the sorrow it has brought to my heart. I will see you.—Yours in all respect,

" PIERO BALBI.

"The signore's death shall not go unavenged. I have sworn it."

CHAPTER X

THE FAKER OF ANTIQUES

"A most curious and unique collection of valuable relics are now on view at Messrs Pond & Verulams, jewellers, of George Street, Hanover Square, consisting of some very ancient gold and silver regal ornaments and also some sacred vessels of great beauty and exquisite workmanship. We are given to understand they were discovered concealed in an old mine near Caxamalca. in the heart of the mountains of Peru, and in all probability formed a portion of the regalia of the chiefs of the nation of the Incas who owned that section of the country until they were decimated and reduced to slavery and worse by the treachery and cruelty of the Spaniards, under the leadership of Pizarro, in the sixteenth century, when, taking advantage of the internecine war which was then raging between two rival chiefs, he poured his legions into the country and conquered it.

"Though the Spaniards obtained vast hoards of treasures it was well-known at the time that much had escaped their avarice, and the articles to be seen at present in George Street without a doubt formed a portion of this remainder. They have been examined by experts who are unanimous in

their conviction that the various works of art are genuine. We would call particular attention to a circlet, or tiara, in gold, which in all probability formed the symbol of sovereignty of the reigning chief. The workmanship displayed in the delicate tracery is exquisite, and although the design is very unlike anything of modern times, the general effect is unique and striking. Art lovers would do well to take advantage of this opportunity of examining the goldsmiths' work of a past age. The exhibition will only remain open for a few days longer. It is a curious coincidence that this galaxy of art treasures should have come before the public just at the time when the attention of the mining world has been arrested by the flotation of 'The Queen of the Cordilleras,' the new Peruvian Copper Mine, in which Mr Giuseppe Guelfo is the moving spirit."

"There, Gerald, what do you think of that?" said Dora Colvin, throwing down the paper from which she had been reading. "Have you time to spare this afternoon to take me to see them? We might call for Pauline, in case she would like to go too."

"By all means, though I doubt it. They would only be painful to her. You see poor Vipan's last trip was all through that country, and the little gold image he gave me the very last time I met him was something he had discovered in one of these places."

"Very well. Perhaps you're right. Though Pauline is certainly much better than she was, still, it will be a long time before she gets over

the shock of poor Wallace's death. I suppose nothing more has come to light?"

"Nothing! Scotland Yard is just as much in the dark as ever. One never knows what they may be doing, but to all appearance they have given over the search, and the murder will be added to the long list of undiscovered crimes. But go, get your things on and let's be off. Poor Vipan! how he would have enjoyed inspecting the antiques!"

Dora Colvin and Gerald found their trouble had not been expended in vain.: The collection at Messrs Pond & Verulam's was quite equal to the description given in the paper. The designs and workmanship were unlike anything they had seen before. Some of the sacred vessels, so described, were of very delicate and graceful form, though in this case the workmanship was rude, while on the other hand the circlet and the regal ornaments were marked by the intricate labour and minute excellence displayed in their every part.

"You would hardly believe they were as old as stated, would you?" said Dora, gazing at a golden boss or shoulder ornament. "They show so few signs of age or wear."

"That is accounted for by the careful manner in which they were packed. Each separate article was wrapped in coarse linen and laid by itself in the box or chest, masses of grass or rushes being used as pads between each to keep them from touching," said an attendant, who kept guard over the glass case in which they were exhibited.

"And you have the chest as well?" inquired Dora.

"Unfortunately no. Directly it was removed from the soil in which it had been buried and was exposed to the air it crumbled into dust and nothing remained but the iron corner clamps, the handles and the lock which you see lying in that corner of the case," pointing out the same.

"What a pity! I should like to have seen whether the joiners of that dead age were as good workmen as the goldsmiths."

"It is a pity, miss, but it could not be helped. Nature will have her way."

That same evening, seated in a little back room in Frogmore Street, Wandsworth, were two men. The one was smoking cigarettes, which he rolled himself with a speed and dexterity that bespoke long practice. The other was more sedately enjoying his tobacco through the medium of a "churchwarden."

"Fill up your glass, Balbi," said the latter, pushing the whisky bottle across the table. "I can't tell you how glad I am to welcome you to England. I mean to do you to rights as long as you honour us with your presence, for I haven't forgotten what you did for me years ago in Florence when I was there studying your antiques without knowing a word of your lingo. That was before you set off for that forsaken place, Peru."

"Ah, we were both of us poor men then! Eh, my good Mr Taft?"

"Poor! I should think so. I'd hardly two sixpences to jingle on a tombstone. But times have altered for both of us since then, I take it?"

"Yes, I've made money, and I'll make a great deal more directly. But you? How do you grow rich?"

"Out of the folly and ignorance of silly people."

"Ah, that's a rich land to cultivate! But how?"

"Now, Balbi, I like you. And what is more, I trust you. I'll let you behind the scenes of my show."

"Your show, eh?"

"My business."

"Ah, I understand."

"Just now there's a rage for the antique--old furniture, old pictures, old jewellery, old plate. Anybody who sets up for anybody must cram his house with them."

"And you find them for him?"

"No, I don't; I *make* them for him. What do you think of that?"

"Make them!" And Balbi took the cigarette from between his lips and stared at his companion.

"Yes, m-a-k-e make them. If they want a sixteenth century chest they can have it, with the initials of an ancestor and the date on it thrown in."

"But the old look--the age."

"Nothing, my dear Balbi, nothing! A little stain, a little acid, some glass paper to take off sharp edges, a crack or two here and there with a heavy hammer and plenty of wormholes bored and there you are!"

The little Italian chuckled to himself.

"I've got a fourteenth century one on order now. It's intended for the Earl of Marshfield," said Taft.

"And he ordered it? Madonna mia!"

"Bless you, no! A firm in Wardour Street ordered it. They'll *find* it among a lot of old lumber in a farmhouse near his seat, and will write him telling him of the discovery. He'll come and see it, and it's a hundred to one he buys it, especially as there's a little bit of a coat of arms with some of his quartering still to be seen."

"And if he doesn't buy it?"

Taft shrugged his shoulders. "Then the coat of arms must come off or be altered into somebody else's."

"Wonderful! And pictures?"

"Child's play. Bit out of one, bit out of another, smoke, dirty varnish, a broken frame and frayed canvas. But they're not like furniture—more risky—and they're too common."

"Ah, and jewellery?"

"Finest game of all, easiest worked and brings in most money. Why, thanks to what you so kindly sent me some months since, I've got as magnificent a show of Inca fakes on exhibition up at Pond's in George Street as ever those rascally Spaniards saw. All London's wild over them. Big nob's have been to see them and pronounced them genuine. There won't be one left in a week or two. And the worst is I shall have to stop for a bit. I dare not turn out too many. We must not discover finds like that one too often or they'd smell a rat. Ah, Balbi, mine's a better game than yours."

"Not if you get hold of the right thing. I *have* got hold of the right thing and that is one reason why I have come to your wealthy London."

"What! You've got a mine?"

Balbi nodded.

"Good for anything?"

He nodded again.

"Then when the time comes put me on to it. I've got a pound or two to spare just now. But mind none of your rotten affairs that will dry up in a couple of years and leave the shareholders with nothing but a lot of worn-out machinery on their hands."

"No, my friend, this is nothing like that."

"By-the-bye, I had a prospectus of one the other day somewhere in your part of the world, but where I put it I don't know. I'll look for it directly."

"Ah!"

"I didn't quite like the names on the board. Too many guinea-pigs for my taste, and there was that man Guelfo."

"Ah!" And the sound Balbi made had no inflection of interrogation about it. It was far more like an angry growl, so fierce that Taft looked round astonished.

"What's the matter? Do you know him?"

"Yes; do you?"

"Saw him once at an inquest I was on, nearly a year ago—a poor young travelling fellow who was murdered."

"Not Signor Vipan?"

"The very man. You didn't know *him*?"

"He was the best friend I ever had. He saved my life. Tell me about it—everything, everything!" And in his excitement Balbi rose, went across and seized Taft's hand.

"My dear man, I'll tell you. But what has it to do with you?"

"Everything! Everything! I'll hang the man who killed my friend."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Only let me find him. But tell me all you know—everything."

For the next hour Taft did nearly all the talking, Balbi only throwing in an interjection now and then or asking a question. And when at length Taft paused, having pretty well exhausted the subject, Balbi said,—

"And what did you think—Guelfo or Ellis or both of them the murderers?"

"No, I'd bet my life on it. If they wanted murder done they'd hire someone to do it for them. They'd never risk their own necks; they're not made that way. But now," rising, "we've had enough of it for one night, and I want to see if I can put my hand on that prospectus for you;" and, taking the lamp in hand, Taft led the way upstairs, where the various rooms were converted into workshops, and in one of which was placed his business desk and safe. Unlocking the latter he took out some specimens of ancient Venetian jewellery in the course of "fakement," and lighting one of the gas jets over the workman's bench handed them to Balbi to examine while he searched his desk for the prospectus.

"Here it is!" he said at length, drawing out the paper and glancing at it. "It is longer ago than I thought—six months since—so there's no chance of your getting any shares now."

"I don't want them. I wouldn't have them if

they were given to me. They were offered me at one time."

"Offered to you! How's that?"

"Only I found that mine. At first I thought it was a good thing, but later on I learnt what it really was. It is almost worked out. A few months and there will be nothing more in it, and then—" And the Italian shrugged his shoulders in a manner that expressed more than words would convey.

"Look here, Balbi, you seem to be well in with Guelfo and his lot. Mind you don't burn your fingers. He's not got as good a name as he might have here in England."

"Good name! Dio!" cried the little man, with a world of contempt in his voice. "He's a devil. You know not what I owe that man. But I'll pay it, I'll pay it to the last atom! He's ruined thousands body and soul. But he has to reckon with Piero Balbi now, though he knows it not at present. He shall, though, one day. I tell you, signore, that man shall go on his knees to me but I will not spare him. I will crush him as I crush—Ah!" And with a cry of pain the Italian quickly raised his hand, which he had thrust downward on the bench in illustration of his threat, to find a small sharp piece of metal had entered the flesh.

"Here, let me get it out for you," said Taft, and while he did so Balbi's eyes fell upon the bench itself.

"Taft," he exclaimed suddenly, "who sits at work here?"

"A sour-tempered fellow called Raynor."

"What does he do?"

"Works in metal."

"Does he design?"

"A little at times."

"Did he do that?" pointing to some pencil-marks on the woodwork of the bench.

"What is it? A circle round some figure. It's nothing!"

"I tell you it is something, and something you should take heed of. It is the badge of a club or association. They thieve, they rob, they kill, for themselves alone. They live for themselves. They care for no one else. They do not recognise love, honour, loyalty, virtue—nothing. Once they have joined, their own fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers are nothing to them. They will rob or murder relatives just the same as they would anyone else. If you have one of them with you, get rid of him or you will regret it."

"Balbi, my dear fellow, you seem threatened with the jumps."

"I was going to ask you to take charge of my papers and documents in your safe till I want them, but while you have one of these fellows on the premises I'd rather keep them myself."

"You mean that?"

"I do. And now I'm off. I shall probably come round and see you to-morrow." And the pair descended to the door. 'Twaft was a moment or two in opening it—the latch rather stuck—and as he did so the scuffle of feet was heard and a figure disappeared round a neighbouring corner.

“Did you see that?” whispered the Italian.

“Yes, some skulking blackguard! There are plenty about here.”

“Then take a word of advice—see to your doors and windows every night. Addio!”

CHAPTER XI

IN MEMORY OF WALLACE VIPAN

THE following morning Piero Balbi knocked at Lord Oxendale's door in Mount Street and inquired if the Signorina Spencer were within. On giving his name he was immediately shown up to Pauline's boudoir.

The little man was strangely excited. For the first time in his life he was about to meet an English lady, and more than that, the lady to whom his dearest friend had been betrothed; and the manner in which he had been at once admitted showed him his coming was looked for and that he was welcome. Small as this incident was, it went straight to his heart and intensified the feeling of attraction he already experienced towards this unknown lady.

He had not waited more than a minute or two when the door opened and Pauline entered. The first sight of her sad and pathetic beauty completed her conquest over the Italian's heart.

"Mr Balbi—Signor Balbi, I suppose I should say!" she exclaimed with a sad smile, coming towards him with her hand extended in welcome, "I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you and make your acquaintance."

"The Signorina is very good!" exclaimed the little man, seizing her hands.

"Not at all. It is you who have conferred a great favour upon me and at the same time given me a most pleasant surprise. For it is so long since I received your letter saying you were coming to England at once that I feared some misfortune had overtaken you."

"That was so, signorina. The day after writing to you I was struck down by the fever and for some weeks had a battle with death, and it was long before I was permitted to take the voyage."

"And you are quite strong and well again now?"

"Quite, thanks be to the saints, and ready to embark upon the task I have undertaken."

"Ah, Mr Balbi, in that lies a strong bond between us. But before we talk of it tell me something of your companionship with him of whom we have both been so cruelly robbed."

"Signorina, it is still hard for me to speak of him. He was more to me than a brother, the truest, firmest, most loyal friend a poor man ever had. He ventured his life for me, and Piero Balbi can never forget that. And though it is now impossible to show him gratitude in life, vengeance remains, and his humble friend will demand—ay, and exact—it to the last fraction. This is the chief reason for my visit to England."

"Yes, yes, I know it. But tell me something of your travels together. Anything, everything concerning him is all of the greatest interest to me. And you were such close companions, you knew more of those last few months of his active life than anyone."

"Si, signorina. Indeed that is so." And for the next hour that fair English girl and the rough, true-hearted little Italian miner, seated side by side, conversed about the man who was so dear to both of them.

At length Pauline said,—

"And now, Mr Balbi, that you have been so good in answering all my questions, it is not fair to trouble you further to-day. It is your turn now to question me, and be sure I will try and give you any information which lies in my power. First of all let me say that that second letter which you enclosed to Mr Vipán at the time you sent him the half of the vichaya leaf he handed to me, and no one, now that Wallace is gone, knows of its contents save myself. If you would like to have it back I will get it for you in a moment." And Pauline half rose.

"No, signorina, I ask that it should be in no safer custody than yours. Keep it, if you will so far oblige me."

"Certainly, but there are two things connected with my dear one's murder which I should like you to see. The police overlooked the one; the other no one has seen besides myself. I will get them." And Pauline left the room.

"Corpo di Bacco!" muttered the Italian to himself. "My purpose is doubled now. Not only shall Signor Vipán's death be avenged but the signorina's grief shall be paid for. Every tear she has shed, every pang she has suffered shall exact its price."

"Now, signore," said Pauline, returning, "this broken sleeve-link was found, half on the floor of

his bedroom and the other half in the drawer containing his papers. To me it reveals nothing—"

"To me it tells a very great deal!" exclaimed the Italian, excitedly, examining the scraps of white metal. "I can almost feel my fingers upon the throat of the murderer of my friend. He has spun the hemp that shall hang him. Look, look! Arrant fool that he was to let his conceit sign his death-warrant! Do you not see the sign—the sign?" pointing out a roughly-engraved circle enclosing a pentagon on each flat surface.

"I had not observed that. Does it mean anything?" she demanded quickly.

"It is the symbol of a brotherhood of crime. This is the second time I have seen it since arriving in your great city. There are members here. I shall find them and then— You will let me take these, signorina?"

"Certainly. Myself I knew not that they were of any value in our quest, but you—"

"I can make them speak. I will force them to tell the name of my friend's murderer. They may strive to remain silent but I will wring the truth from them. Ah, signorina, you have made a great discovery."

"Wait a moment. I have something else you must see which may speak to you when it will not to me. I must tell you that Mr Vipan left me everything by his will, and in consequence all his papers, notes, manuscripts, journals and the correspondence he had preserved came into my hands. These had evidently been ransacked by his murderers, and were found by the police, the

following morning, in a state of the greatest confusion. When they came into my possession I went through them and endeavoured to bring them to some state of order, and while doing so I came across this scrap of paper," handing Balbi an irregularly-torn piece of tinted yellow paper which appeared to have been ripped off the margin of some foreign journal, as it contained in one corner a few words in coarse printing. "You will see," continued Pauline, "that a rough plan has been drawn on one side; this I have since ascertained represents the back of the premises in which Mr Vipán had his chambers in Ducie Street. There is also what I think is a date upon it. It certainly does not appear to afford much information, yet crime has often been brought home on slighter evidence than this."

The Italian turned the paper over, examining it with the greatest attention.

"Again, signorina, you have made an interesting discovery. This scrap of paper I am almost sure was torn from the margin of a journal published daily in Mollendo. The few words of printing are part of an advertisement of a tobacconist who has a shop there. I remember the wording of it, though neither his name nor address appear. Of the plan I can say nothing, as I have not seen the Signor Vipán's chambers."

"But I have, and when I discovered this I took an early opportunity of visiting them again and I am quite sure that this small space here," pointing it out, "indicates the window on the stairs, close to the doors of his rooms, through which access was gained from the roof of an outbuilding, and

the evidence at the inquest failed to prove whether that window was fastened on that night or no. Besides, if it had been, the catch was of so simple a description that anyone could have forced it with a pocket-knife."

"Just so, but this date, which appears to have been written at an earlier time, and with a pen and pencil, is, if my memory does not play me false, the date on which I wrote that letter to Signor Vipan. It seems to me that someone must have closely followed my doings in Peru and have gained a knowledge of my discovery. Then, having ascertained that I had written to the signore, followed, or even travelled by the same steamer as my letter, determined to gain possession of the information."

"But would this have been possible?"

"Oh, yes, quite possible. There are many very desperate men in Peru, signorina—men who stop at nothing when gold is the prize. It is the curse of the country, from the Government, riddled and rotten with bribery and corruption, down to the wild and lawless gauchos, the dregs of the population."

"It sounds so extraordinary," said Pauline, doubtfully.

"Yet it is true. You dwellers in the more civilised and honest land have no idea of what takes place when the Spanish nature has the upper hand."

"But we have rogues in England, in London," said Pauline. "I fear the city is as thickly infested with them as even Peru."

"Ah, it is the same in every large place where

the battle for life is fierce. That there are rogues in your city I do not deny ; otherwise, how could this man Guelfo have obtained possession of information intended only for my friend ? ”

“Guelfo ! Do you know him ? ” exclaimed Pauline, in wondering surprise.

“Diavolo ! Know him ? May the curse of—pardon me, signorina, I forgot myself. Indeed I know him to the cost of me and mine. Has he not cast a blight upon lives which but for him might have been pure and bright ? Did he not come to me in Peru and represent himself as the friend of my friend, and with the signore’s letter and the vichaya leaf endeavour to hoodwink and deceive me. But I knew him even then, and the fooling and deceiving was on the other side. I met his guile with guile. I got what I wanted from him, and with the gold he himself supplied I shall now fight him to the death. Guelfo and I have a long score to settle, and it shall be paid to the last soldo.”

“I had no idea Mr Guelfo had been out to Peru to see you, but I was aware that Mr Vipan had consulted with him about your letter. Can he have handed that letter to him ? ”

“No, signorina, no. Remember what was in that letter which you hold ! ”

“True, I had forgotten.”

“Besides, why did Guelfo lie to me as to my friend not being able to accompany him and Ellis.”

“Ellis was with him ? ”

“Certainly, they came together as representing the Signor Vipan.”

· “Ah! this is terrible. There is more here than the world knows of. I never trusted either of them, but now I am convinced that they know what we are ignorant of concerning the death of poor Wallace. They both gave evidence at the inquest, but their evidence was such that I doubt its being true. Here is a full report. Read it quietly some time and then let me know if you are of my opinion.”

“I will, signorina. I have time before me and this will be the object of my life now.”

“But about that mine?”

“It is already floated.”

“I have heard nothing of it. But are you to be robbed of it?”

“I have nothing to do with it. I have sold it to Guelfo. I never want to hear of it again. It has brought me to your great London. That was all I asked of it.”

“Then you have not reserved any interest in it?”

“None whatsoever.”

“And your friends—”

“My friends shall shun it like the plague. It is no good—a huge fraud. At first when I wrote to the signore I thought I had found an El Dorado. Afterwards, on examining further, I discovered it was a fantasy—a dream. But—” and the little man bent towards Pauline and whispered something in her ear. She listened intently to his words and her face flushed.

“You are sure of this?” she said.

“Certain. I have told no one but you. You take the place of my friend. You shall advise me in this as he would have done.”

"I am afraid I cannot do that; I have not the experience he had. But I could find you honest, trustworthy advisers, I am sure—men whose word you could take, who know the true meaning of 'honesty' and act up to it."

For some time longer these two continued to converse together, and as they talked the stronger grew the bond between them. They were mutually attracted to each other. At length Balbi said,—

"I think I have said all that is needful at present and that we quite understand each other. My first object is to find the signore's murderer and bring him to justice; that I shall accomplish this I am firmly convinced, though the quest may be a long and difficult one. In this I think you might help, signorina, for you are acquainted with Guelfo."

"I know him slightly, for he has had business relations with my father, Lord Oxendale, and I have seen him here on two or three occasions."

"And Ellis?"

"I know him far better. He rendered me a great service some months since."

"But if I might suggest, I would not mention my presence in England or that I have the honour of your acquaintance."

"Certainly not, and I will instruct the footman not to mention the fact that you called to-day."

"It would be just as well. You will permit me to see you from time to time?"

"Of course, and if you would send me a line when to expect you I would be in to see you. In the meantime I should like to give you this as a memento of my betrothed who has been taken

from me." And Pauline placed in the hand of the Italian the valuable gold chronometer which had accompanied the dead explorer on all his travels. "I am sure I am doing what he would have wished in asking you to accept it."

"But, signorina!" gasped the little man, whose eyes were filled with sudden tears that overflowed and ran down his bronzed and furrowed cheeks in a rapid stream. For a time he could not speak, but he raised the watch to his lips and kissed it passionately, and then with a great effort he regained sufficient command over his voice to murmur, "I thank you! I thank you! I can say no more now," and he left the room and hurried down the stairs and out of the house before Pauline had time to ring the bell for him to be shown out.

CHAPTER XII

THE CABMAN AND THE LADY

So full of tears were Balbi's eyes as he left Lord Oxendale's house that he failed to notice the step and nearly fell headlong on the pavement of Mount Street.

He had just reached the turning leading into Hill Street, and was about to return his handkerchief to his pocket, when he found a further and even more urgent use for the handkerchief. Hurrying rapidly towards him with all the signs of nervous agitation strongly marked on his ashy-hued countenance was the man he had last seen on the deck of the steamer in the roadstead of Mollendo—Giuseppe Guelfo. He was evidently suffering from some terrible mental shock. His eyes were wide open, staring straight in front of him but comprehending nothing, his steps were rapid but uncertain, and the walking-stick he carried shook in his palsied grasp and was of little use to him as a means of support. As he walked hurriedly along he frequently glanced back over his shoulder, as though to ascertain if he were being followed.

Balbi was quick to take all this in and in an instant had raised his handkerchief and covered the lower part of his face with it as a man might

who was suffering the agonies of toothache, and thus they passed each other without a sign of recognition on either side. Two fellow-countrymen : Guelfo, whose avarice, wrong-doing and heartless cruelty had hitherto cast a blight on the life of Balbi ; and Balbi who, emerging from the shadow of that blight, had already commenced his scheme of revenge, a scheme which would end how none could then tell. They passed each other, neither knowing that only a few score yards away Fate had at that moment welded a further link in the chain which thenceforth would bind their lives, heretofore lived so far asunder, inexplicably together.

For some distance Balbi walked quietly on, and then, purposely dropping his handkerchief on the pavement, he took the opportunity, as he turned to pick it up, to glance back at Guelfo. He was still hurrying on with uncertain steps, nor did he turn his head again as long as he remained in view.

"Where can he be making for? Shall I follow and see?" muttered Balbi to himself. He stopped a moment or two, uncertain what to do, and then deciding nothing would be gained by such a proceeding he resumed his walk.

In Hill Street was a small crowd of errand-boys and tradesmen collected round a hansom and a piano-organ which were drawn up by the side of the pavement. The cabby, from his lofty seat, was waging a wordy warfare with an indignant butcher-boy, who was loudly proclaiming that something was all cabby's fault.

"Why, I see'd you with my own eyes. You

wasn't a-looking where you was a-driving to, not one blessed bit. Your 'ead was stuck up that 'igh in the air you couldn't see anything lower than the chimney-pots."

"G'awn with yer and mind yer own business," replied the cab-driver, not to be outdone. "Yer people'll be waitin' fer that cat's-meat y've got there!"

"Yah!" was the only answer the boy was capable of at the moment, for the laugh that had greeted the cabby's sally had unnerved him as far as a London errand-boy is capable of being unnerved, and he separated himself from the throng and, whistling defiantly, lounged along the street just as Balbi approached.

Stretching himself up and gazing over the heads of the fringe of people the little Italian saw that something tragic had occurred. One of the two women to whom the piano-organ belonged was resting on the handles by which it was pushed along, leaning against the instrument itself in a semi-unconscious condition. Her face was deadly white, and she was evidently in great pain. Her companion was bending over her, fanning her, and muttering in Italian words of encouragement and endearment in her ear.

One moment's glance at the white face was sufficient for Balbi. With a roughness quite unusual to him he had parted the staring ring of gaping loungers, and springing across the empty space was bending over his countrywoman.

"Lucia! Why, Lucia!" he cried, regardless of the angry remonstrances of those he had jostled. "Madre di dio! she's not dead. Lucia! Lucia!

Answer me—speak to me! It is I, your Piero.” And seizing her hand he raised it to his lips, kissing it passionately. “Lucia, you know Piero? You know me?” And then turning angrily to the woman, who was standing, struck silent with astonishment, he said rapidly in Italian, “Go and get brandy, water, something, anything. She *shall* not die. Here’s money,” and he placed some loose silver in her hand.

The woman started off at once, satisfied to leave her companion in the charge of a compatriot.

Alone with her, for the crowd counted as nothing to him, Balbi continued fanning her with his soft felt hat, all the time whispering to her in her own language.

At length there was a flutter of the closed lids and she half opened her eyes, closing them again immediately with a sigh. Her companion returned with a glass of brandy. Balbi took it from her and held it to the lips of the other woman, imploring her to drink. She heard him and obeyed, and gradually a tinge of warm colour returned to her weather-worn cheeks. She opened her eyes again and they became riveted on the kindly, anxious face of the man who was bending over her. A violent tremor passed through her frame as, in an almost inaudible tone, she murmured, “Piero!”

“Yes, yes, it is Piero! He has found you again! You are better already. You will soon be well. Oh, Lucia, Lucia, my dear one, have no more care. You are in my hands now.” And then, regardless of the bystanders, he bent his head and reverently kissed her pale cheek.

Gradually the woman recovered. She had

indeed been more frightened than hurt. While Balbi waited beside her he learnt from the cabman and the spectators that she had been crossing the road, intent on catching a copper that was about to be thrown from an upper window, and had paid no attention to the approaching hansom nor the shout of the driver until the vehicle was on her, and the shoulder of the mare had caught her and spun her across the roadway, to fall upon the kerb close to where the piano-organ was standing.

The cabman had not been to blame. He had done his utmost to avoid the accident, pulling his mare right back on her haunches. It had been the fault of the woman alone, for she had not attempted to cross the road until the cab was almost upon her.

Balbi quickly recognised all this and asked,—

“Had you a fare?”

“Yes,” said the man. “Lord! what a fright he was in, to be sure. The moment he caught sight of her he turns as pale as death, and trembles like a ashbin.”

“What was he like?” asked Balbi, eagerly. “A dark, stout man with a black beard cut short?”

“That’s him!” replied the man. “Wore a topper and carried a stick. When he see’d what had happened, he nips out of the cab like a knife. ‘Here, cabby,’ says he, ‘here’s five shillings for yourself, and give this to the woman when she’s better.’ And he slips half-a-thick-un into my hand and off he goes up the street, full pelt. He wasn’t in, no ways tight-fisted.” And the man offered the ten-shilling piece to Balbi, saying,

"You'd better take charge of this now since you know the lady."

But Balbi's hand did not move to receive it.

"Curse him!" he exclaimed bitterly.

The cabby looked startled.

"Ain't yer goin' to take the money?" he asked.

"No, not if it were a thousand pounds. Keep it yourself, man, if you're not afraid of it."

"Afraid on it? No, guv'nor, I ain't afraid on it, and if you don't want it it'll come in handy for the missus and the kids. Thank you, sir, you're a gentleman."

By this time Lucia had practically recovered, and Balbi, having arranged with her companion for the return of the piano-organ, helped the woman into the waiting hansom and drove off to a small second-class Italian restaurant in Old Compton Street, Soho.

During the meal there was little conversation between the two, for there were others dining at the same table, but as time went on these gradually left one by one until the room was nearly empty.

Balbi ordered coffee, and as they drank it he heard the life history of the woman he loved during the long years she had been lost to him. When he had last seen her she had been Lucia Malfi, the well-dowered daughter of Antonio Malfi, the keeper of a *trattoria* at Carmignano, near to Florence. It was in those days that he had laid his heart at her feet. But Lucia was young and thoughtless, and while he was away working as Italians can and do work at the railway boring through the Alps, news reached him of

the return to Carmignano of a good-looking stranger, one Giuseppe Guelfo, whom he had once seen, and who was paying court to her, though report said it was more for her small dowry than herself. This was followed soon after by news of the disappearance of the two. And from that hour all was silence. Balbi had never returned to the house which had lost all charm for him, but put the world between him and his disappointment, and among the *sierras* and *punas* of Peru strove to forget the one romance of his early life until the strange workings of Fate brought to his side the man he hated with all the intensity of his southern nature.

"But, Lucia, where is he now?" Balbi asked in the course of their conversation, for he was anxious to discover if she had recognised the occupant of the cab.

"Nay, Piero, how should I know? I have not seen him nor heard news of him this ten years. Nor do I want to see him again. He has gone from my life. It was my money, not me, he cared for. He took that and then—but why recall it all? When we were first married he—"

"You were married?"

"Of course; in Florence! Oh, Piero, you did not think so badly of me as that?"

"I knew not what to think. I had no news. But what became of him? Have you never heard?"

"Never! From the day he left me I know nothing. He may be dead, but if not he has made money, I am sure. He would let nothing stand in his way. Piero, he was the most selfish, stony-hearted man upon earth."

"But you, Lucia? What did you do when you were left alone? Did you not go back to Carmignano?"

"I could not; my pride would not allow it. I, who had been queen of the village. No, I have never seen our dear Carmignano since the day we left it together."

"Then how did you live?"

"For a time by straw-plaiting, and then I came here, and for years I have been round with the piano. Ah, Piero, you may be shocked, but I have saved money. I am known now and the English are kind and generous, and some day I shall return to the sunshine of our own loved Tuscany, but never again to Carmignano."

"But you must give up this life. Now I have found you again there is surely no need—"

The woman laid her hand on his arm with a gesture of affection, saying,—

"No, Piero, I know how good and kind and forgiving you are, but after the way I treated you years ago—"

"Hush, Lucia; that is all forgotten now. Don't mention it again."

"But I must, Piero. My pride is as great as thine. Do you think I can forget my wrongdoing towards you in the pleasure of meeting you again? But I fear me the pleasure is chiefly on my side," for Balbi's brows were knitted and his gaze far away as he considered whether or no to tell her of Guelfo's close proximity. Her words, however, brought him back to himself.

"Nay, Lucia, say not so. You little know how you have ever been in my mind through all these

long years, how I have looked forward to the hour in which we should meet again and when it would be in my power to avenge the wrong that villain—”

“And we have met, Piero. Two waifs of the past who have drifted together again. Let us be content. Him you never knew, and if I dream not of vengeance why should you trouble who have lost nothing?”

“Lost nothing! Is your happiness nothing? Does my happiness count for nought? Where are the years we might have spent together? Where is the home I promised myself, with you as its mistress? Is all this nothing?” And Balbi in his excitement raised his voice and rose from his seat, attracting the attention of the one or two other guests who still remained in the restaurant.

Among them was a young man in workman's dress, who, under pretence of reading one of the journals which was lying on the table, was endeavouring to catch some words of his neighbours' conversation. He had the sheet before his face but his eyes never travelled over the printed lines.

“I tell you, Lucia, Guelfo has run up a score that must be paid—if he be alive.” And with that Balbi moved towards the door as the reader followed him and his companion with his eyes, while a smile of satisfaction lurked about the corners of his mouth.

Once outside, the conversation was continued as they walked slowly through the sordid, gloomy streets of that quarter of London. Balbi urged Lucia to give up her present mode of life and

allow him to be responsible for her comforts and well-being. But the Italian woman's pride was great, and she would not hear of such a thing. She declared she was happy in her own way. She had formed friends among the Italian colony and had enough and to spare for her wants, and that she would be a drag upon no one.

Balbi listened and was fair to recognise that she had common sense on her side, and further he saw that while the scheme of his life was unfulfilled, her presence with him might be a drag and a hindrance. She was well, and, in her way, comfortable and happy. He would consent to fall in with her wishes for a time, only stipulating that they should be in constant communication and that she should do nothing without letting him know. He was a stranger in England, unfamiliar with its ways and customs, and she who had lived here so many years would take no harm in continuing her present life a little longer. Of Guelfo's presence she knew nothing and it was most unlikely that they would cross each other's paths again. Therefore let matters continue as they were.

But all through their stroll, though they were quite unaware of the fact, they were shadowed by their fellow-diner at the restaurant. With persistent patience he dogged their footsteps up one street and down another, never allowing them to escape from his observation, and when at length, having exchanged addresses, they parted in Holborn—for Lucia would not allow Balbi to accompany her farther—as she made her way down Saffron Hill she was still followed at a distance by the man who had taken such interest

in her conversation in the restaurant in Old Compton Street.

"Balbi, Guelfo, Taft, and now this Italian donna. This should mean something good or I'm a Dutchman," muttered the shadower to himself as, his task being finished, he strolled away towards Tottenham Court Road.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT HAPPENED AT TAPLOW REGATTA

"If a Mr Reichardt should call this morning while I am here show him in at once. If he comes after I'm gone—and I shall be leaving about eleven—tell him to call to-morrow at twelve," said Guelfo as he passed on through the clerks' office to his private room in Throgmorton Avenue.

His staff was too well-drilled to take open notice of his somewhat unusual appearance on the morning in question, but for all that there were sundry winks and smiles among the clerks as soon as the "Guv'nor's" back was turned.

Guelfo was not in his City garb. The silk hat had given place to a Homburg straw and the black frock coat to a light cloth cutaway suit, with white spats. The fact was the great financier was on pleasure bent. It was the day of the Taplow Regatta and he was going down as a guest of Ellis, who had a party on his house-boat, the *Ena*, moored below the bridge at Maidenhead. But business was ever the first thought with Guelfo, and coming early to the City he intended to get through a certain amount of work before enjoying himself.

He had waded through his mass of corre-

spondence with his head clerks when the door opened and the man with whom he had struck that eventful bargain in Paris was shown in.

"My letter found you, then?" Guelfo said, nodding to him.

"Yes, and I am here in answer," replied the man.

"Well, I have a little commission which I think you might be able to execute if you have any spare time."

"Unfortunately I have more spare time than money just now," answered the German.

"Then we may be able to do business. You know Saffron Hill?"

"By repute, yes."

"Make yourself better acquainted with it and find out for me if an Italian woman of the name of Lucia Malfi or—well, she may have taken another name and called herself Guelfo—is living anywhere about there. She is in the habit of going out with a piano-organ."

"Most of the Italian women do that. You give me very little to work on."

"If I knew everything there would be no need to trouble you, my friend," said Guelfo, shrewdly. "You say you have time and I have already proved you are no fool; therefore the scarcity of information is no reason why you should not succeed and earn some honest money by way of a change."

"Very well. I will try. But what about pay?"

"There's something to start on." And Guelfo handed the man five sovereigns. "Only find out

what I want and you will have no reason to complain."

"You can't describe her, I suppose?"

"How can I? All Italian women of her class look more or less alike in London. She must be between thirty-five and forty, black hair, large dark eyes, the remains of beauty still lingering on her face, and her native place was Carmignano, near Florence. That ought to be enough for you to go on."

"I'll try; I can't promise more. I'm to keep it dark, I suppose?"

"Dark as night. I don't appear in this show. Just let me know where she lives; that's all I want."

"Very well. But now I am here, don't you think you could spring a little more over that other matter about which I called on you in Paris?"

"Did I pay you what I agreed?"

"Yes."

"Do I owe you anything?"

"Well, not exactly, but you've done pretty well over—"

Guelfo pressed the button in the arm of his chair and a clerk entered the room.

"Show Mr Reichardt out!" And without another word Guelfo turned to his letters as the German, with an evil look on his face, left the room.

Three-quarters-of-an-hour later Guelfo was on the platform at Paddington, the centre of a gaily-clad group of men and women who were waiting to enter the train for Taplow. Among them was

Lord Oxendale and his daughter, Ellis, Dora Colvin, Gerald Mildmay and a friend of his, a Mr Roland Kenrick, who had been with him at Harrow and was now a member of the Stock Exchange, together with Sir Charles Olcott and several others who have no connection with this curious chapter of secret history. The party was a merry one; much laughter, joking and chaff flew from side to side before the specially-ordered saloon received its occupants and the journey to the lovely riverside resort commenced.

Guelfo had managed by manœuvring to obtain a seat beside Pauline and endeavoured to ingratiate himself with her by what he considered rather smart, witty conversation. He was one of those men who seemed to imagine ladies have a partiality for puns, and his talk was interlarded with most puerile attempts in this direction, not bad enough to be good and not good enough to make them worth listening to. Pauline was very bored, but for her father's sake she displayed an outward appearance of interest. And yet it was not entirely for his sake, for since her conversation with Balbi, when she learned of the great financier's presence in Peru, she had made up her mind to better her acquaintance with Guelfo on the chance that in conversation he might let drop some remark or statement which would prove of value in the endeavour to which Balbi and she had devoted themselves. Guelfo was therefore congratulating himself on the impression he was creating, and was redoubling his efforts to be bright and sparkling, when a shadow came over his sunshine in the person of Gerald Mildmay, who,

crossing from the opposite side of the carriage with a young man beside him, said,—

“Miss Spencer, may I introduce an old school-fellow and a great friend of mine of whom you may have heard Dora speak?”

Pauline smiled, only too thankful for the interruption, and taking this as a sign of acquiescence Mildmay continued,—

“Mr Roland Kenrick—Miss Spencer. We had no wet bobs at Harrow, you know, Miss Spencer, from the simple fact we had no river, but I can assure you since then Kenrick has served his apprenticeship on the river, and should you require the services of any ‘jolly young waterman’ during to-day’s proceedings you cannot do better than secure him.”

“That’s an excellent character, Mr Kenrick,” said Pauline, with a smile.

“Far too flattering, I’m afraid,” replied the man, as Mildmay left them and returned to his seat. “But I’m very fond of the river and have gone in for boating a good deal since I got to work in the City. During the summer I take rooms at Staines, and then directly I can get away I hurry down, change, and spend the evening on the water.”

“Delightful! But won’t you sit down, Mr Kenrick?” And the girl edged away from Guelfo, drawing her skirt closer about her. “I think we can make room.”

Guelfo, out of common politeness, was obliged to act on the hint and squeeze himself nearer his neighbour on the other side, though there was anger in his heart as he did so.

"Do you know Mr Guelfo? Mr Guelfo—Mr Kenrick," exclaimed Pauline, as the young man sat down.

"Glad to meet you," said Kenrick, brightly. "Of course I know your name well. What City man does not?"

"More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows," replied Guelfo as a sharp and apt remark.

"Ah, Mr Guelfo, the character you allot yourself will hardly pass muster, I'm afraid," said the other; "but, thank goodness! we've done with the City for to-day and are going to enjoy ourselves I hope. The weather has been kind at any rate and that is half the battle."

"Oh, yes, is it not splendid?" said Pauline. "A wet day on the river is something awful."

And so the conversation continued for the most part between Pauline and Kenrick, with Guelfo throwing in an occasional remark, until Taplow was reached and the party descended.

Guelfo had not enjoyed the journey so much as he had intended. His *tête-à-tête* had been interrupted by a stranger, and what was worse, the lady had shown no desire to resent the interruption but had appeared to fall in with it gladly. Still, there was the whole day before him, and he would make opportunities when they reached the house-boat, where they would not be so crowded together as they had been in the saloon. Guelfo was a man who only recognised a difficulty as something to be overcome.

Drags and carriages were waiting for the party to convey them to the river, and in a short time

they were all gathered on the upper deck of the *Ena* watching, from beneath its awning, the gay scene before them.

When Ellis did a thing he did it well, and he meant his regatta party to be a success. The *Ena* was a large and roomy boat, artistically decorated in white and gold, and plentifully adorned with hanging baskets and boxes of flowers. He had secured a good position for it a couple of hundred yards in front of the winning-post, so that his guests might witness the last desperate spurts in the various races, the preliminary heats of some of which were already being contested. His London friends found other guests already in possession, and after greetings and introductions had taken place the party descended to the cabin for lunch. Here Guelfo again managed to secure a seat next Pauline and was assiduous in his care for her every want, and it was during the meal that Pauline endeavoured to draw the conversation round to the object she had in view. She gave him every opportunity of informing her of his trip to Peru had he been so inclined, but he fought shy of the subject and merely spoke of his absence as a business trip which he had been compelled to undertake, without giving any details as to where he had been or what he had done, and Pauline, without disclosing her hand to a greater extent than she desired, could not ask more definite questions.

The afternoon passed as afternoons at regatta parties are wont to pass—in gossip, chaff, tea, ices and smoke, and a casual interest in the various crews who are supposed to provide the amusement.

Pauline had ample opportunity of improving her acquaintance with Roland Kenrick, and she made the most of it. She liked him from the very first. His appearance was all in his favour. Standing over six feet, and broadly proportioned, he was a true figure of a man. His hair, a light brown, showed an inclination to curl where not cut too closely. His face, a bright and open one with laughing eyes, had, when at rest, a look of determination about it which gave promise of success in anything he might undertake. In looks he was the very antithesis of the usual weedy, pale-faced, half-developed City young man. He was almost boyish in his conversation, yet Pauline found he could talk earnestly and to the point when occasion demanded it.

During the afternoon she learned how he was working in the City steadily and with a purpose, and he gave her the idea that his occupation was a very different one to that of Guelfo. Honesty and straightforwardness were his leading principles, and anything shady or questionable he scouted. Pauline was impressed with him, and he was the first man since the death of poor Vipan who had awakened any real interest in her mind.

The regatta proper had come to a conclusion, and before the illuminated procession of boats was to take place Ellis had provided another sumptuous cold collation for his guests; for the return to town was not to be made until a late hour. The meal finished, the party became more split up, some taking a stroll on the towing-path, others preferring to remain and chat on the deck, while others again made their way to the neighbouring

boat-house and secured such crafts as were not already engaged for a trip on the water. Among these were Pauline, Guelfo, Gerald Mildmay and one or two girls.

"What shall we take, Miss Spencer?" asked Gerald. "There is not a very great choice."

"There is quite enough for me. I shall take that canoe," indicating the only Rob Roy left against the raft.

"Really, Miss Spencer, are you wise?" asked Guelfo.

"Very," replied Pauline, laughing. "I am quite accustomed to manage one; we have a canoe on our own lake at home."

"But would it not be more pleasant if we were all together?" continued Guelfo.

"No, Mr Guelfo, I am going 'on my own' this evening, and the rest of you can embark in a tub and become spectators of my prowess," she said, laughing.

"Oh, I can answer for Miss Spencer's abilities on the water," said Gerald, as he proceeded to help her into the canoe, following her with the other girls in a good safe family boat, while Guelfo secured a whip and embarked by himself.

Thus distributed, the party returned downstream to the neighbourhood of the *Ena*, and here they paddled about among a crowd of similar boats waiting for the procession. Pauline was quite at home in her craft, and the crowding, and in some cases very doubtful watermanship, presented no difficulties to her. Guelfo, on the other hand, was hardly so happy. He could scull in a way, but he had not had much experience of a Thames crowd

and was continually getting into people's way. He endeavoured to keep near Pauline and carry on a conversation with her, but it was at best very fragmentary.

Suddenly a hoarse whistle was heard and one of the Richmond excursion steamers was seen coming down the reach on its homeward journey. There was an opening out of the smaller pleasure craft to leave a passage, some making towards one bank, some towards the other. Pauline was not far from the *Ena* at the time, and there was no necessity for her to move. Guelfo's move in the centre of the river became flurried at the approach of the steamer, and without looking round he pulled his left scull violently, running his bows into a boat behind him.

"Take care! Where are you coming to?" shouted a voice as its owner pulled the nose of the boat clear. But Guelfo paid no attention for his eyes were riveted on two figures seated in the fore part of the steamer.

Balbi and Lucia had also been enjoying a river holiday, and as they sat there, contented and happy in their own companionship, listening to the strains of the steamer's band, they had not a thought for the man so close to them, who had brought so much misery into their lives.

Guelfo had caught sight of them, and in his anxiety to escape their notice he continued to pull blindly.

There was an extra loud shout behind him which caused him to look round and find that he had run into and swamped the canoe, and that Pauline was just disappearing beneath the water.

In a second a figure had dived from the deck of the *Ena*, and the next minute Guelfo beheld Roland Kenrick, the last man in the world he would have desired in that position, supporting Pauline with one arm while he endeavoured to make his way towards the house-boat, where all was excitement.

The financier had received two shocks within the space of sixty seconds and he knew not which of them was the worse.

CHAPTER XIV

EXPLAINS A CURIOUS ARRANGEMENT

"WHAT name, sir?"

"There is my card!" And Gerald Mildmay handed one of his cards to the clerk who had come forward to attend to him, and then, as the youth disappeared with it into an inner office, sat down to wait.

In a few seconds the clerk reappeared, saying,—

"Will you kindly step this way, sir?" And Mildmay quickly found himself in the sanctum of Ford Brothers, the great glassware dealers of — Street, Hatton Garden.

"Good morning, Mr Mildmay. You've called in response to our letter respecting the electric-light installation?"

"I have, Mr Ford. Before we give a quotation we always prefer to see exactly what is required ourselves in place of sending a clerk or foreman."

"Quite right! Much more satisfactory. I'll go round with you now. I can explain things, and then, if you will excuse me, as I am very busy this afternoon, you can make what measurements you require by yourself."

"Thank you; that will do nicely."

For the next half-hour Mr Ford and Mildmay were deep in the matter of lamps, wires, connec-

tions and switches, going up and down the staircase and through the large, crate-covered floors of the lofty warehouse, which quite overtopped the squalid tenements that still remained standing in the neighbourhood of Saffron Hill.

Gerald Mildmay was a good man of business and quickly grasped the requirements of the firm, but the best way of carrying them out was a more lengthy matter and necessitated a good deal of consideration and many measurements, and for a long time after Mr Ford had retreated to his office Mildmay was busy, first on one floor and then on another, hurrying from place to place, making measurements and entering the results in a notebook he carried.

He was on the top floor, standing against one of the windows looking over Saffron Hill, lost in a mental calculation, when he started and his attention became fixed on the upper window of a house on a lower level of the slope towards Farringdon Street.

He drew half back, so as not to be observed, still keeping his eyes fixed on the window.

He could see well within the room in which two persons were deep in conversation. One of these he recognised in a moment as Guelfo. There was no mistaking the heavy form and the black beard. Mildmay had been in his company too recently to be deceived. The only matter that puzzled him was the reason for Guelfo being there at all.

From the window by which he stood he could see the whole of the front of the house with the two or three foreign-looking loafers hanging about the door, the dirty lower windows with several

cracked panes, as well as the brightly-polished one with its flower-box filled with blooms, behind which the great Guelfo was deeply engaged in conversation with a dark-haired, olive-skinned woman, whose dress and general appearance was somewhat above the usual type to be found in that locality.

From what Mildmay could make out the room was comfortably and brightly furnished. There were pictures on the walls and a cloth upon the table, on which stood a glass full of flowers. The owner of the room was clearly possessed of self-respect.

But what was Guelfo doing there? The very last place in all London in which he might have been expected to be seen. Truly, the woman might be a compatriot of his, but her surroundings did not give any indication of poverty, and Mildmay could not honestly attribute any great philanthropic virtues to the financier. He could see that the man was doing the larger share of the talking. The woman was only occasionally putting in a word. Nor did their conversation appear to be a particularly happy one.

Never once did a smile appear on the face of either of them. Guelfo had placed his hat upon the table and made use of his hands in gesticulations, but the woman sat perfectly still, with her hands at rest in her lap, listening quietly, quite unmoved.

Mildmay was fascinated. All his measurements and calculations were forgotten in the scene which was being enacted before his eyes.

At length Guelfo rose to his feet, and taking up his hat continued his talk standing. He appeared

to be urging a point or endeavouring to convince his companion on some matter, but judging from the expression on the woman's face his labour was in vain. She did not move, and when, with a final flourish of his hat, Guelfo left the room she still remained where she was.

Mildmay saw him hurry from the house, through the knot of loungers, who followed him with inquiring glances as he made his way up the street towards Holborn, and then again turned his attention to the occupant of the room.

For some time the woman remained just as Guelfo had left her, seated with her eyes bent upon the carpet, and then rising quickly and taking her handkerchief from her pocket she dashed the tears from her eyes and commenced making preparations for tea. It was as if she had thrust the recollections of the interview behind her as something past and done with and had taken up again the thread of her daily life and occupation.

"What can it all mean?" exclaimed Mildmay to himself, turning away from his post of observation. "What on earth can Guelfo want with that woman? No good, I'll be bound. She may be, and probably is, an Italian, but she does not look as if she had much money behind her, and money is the only thing that has any fascination for that fellow. Well, after all, it's no business of mine," and his eyes fell upon the house next the one in which the interview he had witnessed had taken place. It was empty and the thought came upon him that it would be an excellent position for a warehouse. How would it be to make inquiries

about it and ascertain if it were on the market.

Gerald Mildmay, since his engagement to Dora, was very keen on the making of money, and never allowed any opportunity that showed even a shadow of a chance to escape him. He might be able to secure the premises, pull them down and erect on the site a building which would return him a very handsome percentage on the money invested. To think was to act with him.

As soon as he had finished his measurements and calculations at Ford Brothers' warehouse he made his way into Saffron Hill, to the house in question. It was locked up; the lower windows had most of the panes broken, and the whole place was rapidly going to rack and ruin.

From a small shop in the neighbourhood Gerald learned the name of the firm of agents in whose hands the property was, and before returning to his offices in Westminster he paid them a visit in the City and ascertained further particulars. They could give him no very definite information, but stated that they would see the owner and let Mr Mildmay know the result in the course of a few days.

It was rather more than a week after this that, when Gerald was again at Ford Brothers overlooking his workmen, who were busy on the installation, he happened to glance through one of the windows and was surprised to see signs of occupation in the formerly empty house. A workman was busy piling crates, in which goods were packed in hay and straw, in one of the upper rooms, while the lower room appeared to be filled with similar objects.

As he stood there the man came to the window and, throwing up the sash, leaned out, turning his head in the direction of the window of the room in which Mildmay had witnessed the Guelfo interview taking place a short time previously, which was on the same level. The man remained motionless for some minutes, as though listening, and then, apparently satisfied, he drew in his head, closed down the sash and commenced moving the straw-laden crates again until they formed a screen halfway up the window. From the ease with which he lifted them the contents could not have been very heavy.

Mildmay's business took him to another part of the premises, but later on, having occasion to return, he again glanced from the window and his attention was at once arrested. He could just see something above the top edge of the crates flash backwards and forwards at regular intervals. Occasionally it would stop and disappear for a few minutes and then would recommence its regular movements. He listened intently but no sound reached him. The distance and the fact that there were two closed windows between would account for that. Gerald was particularly busy that afternoon, and therefore could not afford to waste the time he had on the former occasion. He was obliged to leave the mystery unsolved.

On his return to the office he found a letter from the firm of City agents informing him that they had heard from their client that the premises were no longer in the market as he had already let them without their knowledge and offering apologies for the trouble he had been put to.

"Well, that's done with!" said Mildmay to himself, crumpling up the letter and tossing it into the waste-paper basket, "and perhaps it's as well. I might only have burnt my fingers over it. After all, building is not my business, and a man had always better stick to what he knows something about. But I should like to know what that Guelfo was doing in Saffron Hill."

In a street in the immediate neighbourhood of Tottenham Court Road, one of those melancholy-looking, smoke-begrimed thoroughfares where the houses appear to be the abiding-places of ghosts rather than living human beings, and the shops only seem to do a phantom business, was a house the lower windows of which were filled with ground glass and the front door never opened. During the day it gave every indication of being empty and deserted, and it was only when night had fallen that it gave signs of being a shelter for human beings.

Then figures might occasionally be observed passing down the area steps and disappearing within the battered green doorway situated beneath the front steps.

The police knew it as a club-house, but a quiet one. It had never given them trouble. There was no gambling, in the ordinary acceptance of the word, taking place there. It had never given occasion for a raid.

That questionable characters congregated there they would not have denied, but they were better there than about the streets, and if wanted it was known where they could be found. So the squalid

club was allowed to exist, winked at but observed.

In a corner of one of the ground-floor rooms, behind a small, marble-topped table, smoking and drinking lager beer, were two men, Reichardt and a friend. They were conversing in low tones so that the three or four other members on the opposite side of the room, engaged over a game of dominoes, could not hear them.

"Well, will you take it on?" asked Reichardt in his broken English. "I tell you there's money in it."

"So there ought to be; it's worth it. Are you sure he'll pay up?"

"Look here, Raynor, don't we both belong to the circle?"

"Of course we do."

"Ain't we all pledged to each other?"

"Oh, yes, I know all that; you need not yarn it out. If he stumps up you'll go swags, I know; I don't doubt you. But if he didn't then we should have worked for nothing, and considering that it may mean—" And Raynor drew a grimace. "I don't quite see where the laugh comes in."

"He'll stump up. I'll have so much down before I take it on and the rest when we've finished. I'd do it all on my own, but I'm afraid some of them about there know me now and that might prove awkward. He's a man of his word, and what he says he'll give he'll give, but devil a penny more will you get out of him. I'll see him again and fix up matters fair and square, and then if everything is right you can take it over."

"But you say you've worked most of the tricks already?"

"Yes, I have. I've skinned the wall till it's almost as thin as a sheet of brown paper. I've made a small hole just behind where her bed stands, and all you'll have to do is to fix the pipe and turn the cock of the cylinder, set the clock-work going in the top room and the one on the ground floor, then slip over the backyard wall into the alley, and leave matters to take care of themselves."

"And if it doesn't catch on the whole plant would show up as clear as mud."

"My boy, there's no fear of that. The place will be a little hell in three minutes. There won't be so much as a bone left in half an hour."

"Ah, if I were only sure of that."

"I tell you it will be so. I'm not going to lead a pal wrong. However, there it is; take it or leave it. I know others who would be only too glad of the chance I've given you."

Raynor still hesitated. "How do you know the next house is going to catch?" he asked.

Reichardt leaned towards his companion and whispered something in his ear.

The expression of Raynor's face changed and he exclaimed, "Do you mean that? By Jove! what a dodge. And it would leave no tell-tale traces either. I think I'll go in for it."

"That's right; you won't repent it. And after it's come off you will be able to live well for a long while."

"But tell me, how shall I know when to turn the cylinder on?"

"Why, you fool, haven't I said there is a hole through which you can hear everything? You'll

wait till she has fallen asleep and then set things going."

"Very well. You don't want me to see the boss, I suppose?"

"No, much better not. I'll let him think there's only me in it. He'll feel safer, and we shall have two strings to our bow without his knowing it. And then, if he were to try to play any hanky-panky with us, you can step in and take up the whip. But there'll be nothing of that kind. In his way he's all right, but about as bad a villain as they make them."

"Very well, then, I'm with you if you can square matters all serene. You and I'll work together, but you'll have to put me up to the ropes a good deal more before it comes off."

"Of course. I'll meet you there. Better not be seen together outside. Be here next Tuesday."

"Right, and now I'm off. Adieu!"

And in this way preparations were made, as they often are made, in the heart of our great City, for the carrying-out of one of the most cold-blooded, cruel, diabolical plots that the imagination of selfish man ever invented.

CHAPTER XV

THE FATAL SIGN

"My dear man, you're the very fellow I most wanted to see. Come in! Come in quick! I was just looking out for a policeman, but you'll do instead. Come in!" And Taft seized hold of Balbi's arm and dragged him through the doorway, shutting and carefully locking the door behind him.

The little Italian was somewhat surprised at his greeting and exclaimed,—

"What is it? What is it, my friend? Nothing wrong, I hope."

"It very soon would have been if I were a heavy sleeper. Someone has been trying to jump my crib."

"Jump your crib! What does that mean? I do not understand."

"Break into the place and rob me. But come and I'll show you."

"It's fortunate that I came round, amico mio, and yet somehow I hardly liked to do so. But when I had arrived at my hotel, after having spent the evening with Igucia at a theatre, I felt I could not rest. I could not sleep. I was what you call all muscles—ah! nerves. I was on edge. So

I said to myself, 'I go and see amico Taft and have some of his English whisky'—and here I am, and the clock striking one!"

As Balbi had been talking Taft had led the way up the stairs into a back room on the first floor and then, without taking any notice of his friend's remarks, he said, pointing to a window, the sash of which was partly raised,—

"Look there! He must have come up that rain-water spout like a monkey, scrambled from it on to the sill, and held on by his eyelids, as far as I can make out, until he could force the catch and get his foot inside."

"Ah, your London thieves are very clever. I take off my hat to them."

"It's more than I do, the infernal blackguards! He'd have made a hole in my pockets if he hadn't dropped a tool and woke me."

"And you didn't catch him?"

"Catch him! No, he was in far too great a hurry."

"Then what has he taken?"

"Nothing so far as I can see at present, but he soon would have done. Ah! look here," turning to the safe, "this is where he was at work. Do you see the smear of oil and the marks of the drills round the lock?"

But Balbi was not looking. He was holding a small, steel instrument close under the flaring gaslight and examining it intently.

"What have you got there, Balbi?" asked the excited Taft.

"You say he has taken nothing?" replied the Italian.

"No, nothing, but no thanks to him."

"Then you are not a loser?"

"Only of my night's rest."

"Forget that and do not call in the police."

"What—let him get off scot-free? Not me!"

"Yes, you will, my friend, when I ask you."

"Look here, Balbi, what's the matter with you? You're not usually like this. What's the meaning of it?"

"That's the meaning, my friend!" And Balbi held the tool towards Taft.

"Eh, what? There's nothing in this," he exclaimed as he took it.

"Yes, there is. What do you see on the side there?"

"The maker's stamp as far as I can understand."

"You're wrong; it's the same sign I found drawn on this bench here when I first came to see you."

"Is it? I believe you're right, but it's nearly worn off."

"My dear friend, that bit of steel may hang a man if you don't call in your English policeman. If you do, it won't."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do. Don't you remember what I told you when we found the same mark on the bench and I asked you who worked there?"

"Yes, Raynor; but he had left me and has never been near me since."

"Diavolo! I think he has not been very far off this evening."

"I wish I had got him here now," exclaimed the

angry Taft; "he would have said good-bye to freedom for a jolly long time if I had."

"But you have not and there is an end of that; so let it go and listen to me. First of all, fasten that window. Let us see if he has left anything else, then we will go down to your room, you shall give me some of your excellent English whisky and we will talk."

"Balbi, you're one of the rummiest fellows I've ever met, but your head seems screwed on right, and there's some idea bubbling about in those Italian brains of yours. I'll hear what you've got to say, but more than that I won't promise, because you're as ignorant as a baby about our English sneaks, and as likely as not your idea is all wrong. But for old friendship's sake I'll listen to you. Come along!"

Taft, as he had been talking, had secured the window with a big nail and had glanced round the place to discover if anything else had been left by the thief. Then, having satisfied himself on that point, he turned down the gas and led the way to his own sanctum where, having got the English whisky so liked by his friend, and some water, he threw himself into a chair, signing his visitor to another and said,—

"Now then, my dear old Italiano, I'm ready for you."

"Quite right, my friend; now you show sense. You remember what I told you that first evening I was here and how I warned you?"

"Yes."

"Well, this evening we find the mark again."

"Do we? I'll admit it looks like it, but it's almost worn out. I can't swear to it."

"But I can."

"All right! What then?"

"You've had two visits from a member of the circle. Raynor, we think, is one of the gang. Then is it not likely that Raynor was here again to-night, or one of his friends?"

"And if he was, I haven't got him and I don't know where I could lay my hands on him."

"Taft, my dear friend, *I* will find him. I will find his companions—his, what you call in English, 'pals'—and among them the man who murdered my friend. You shall leave all this to me. I demand it; it is my right. You gain nothing by giving it to the police. I gain everything by your giving it to me. I have sworn to be avenged. It is my vendetta," he whispered. "Since I have been in England I have been working and laying my traps, but so far I have caught nothing. I have had very little to go upon. But I have learnt your English ways, and now that I am more ready this comes to-night just when I am waiting for it. I will make good use of it you may be sure. Give me some more of that English whisky."

"Balbi, my friend," replied Taft, complying with the request, "you're a rum 'un, you are, but I like you and I'll do what you ask, though it's quite out of order. We English believe in our police, and when anything is wrong we put the matter into their hands and wait like a flock of sheep for them to put it right for us—if they can," and Taft indulged in a portentous wink. "You seem to want to take this matter in hand yourself and do the

scoring off your own bat. Well, be it so! You can do no harm though I don't fancy you'll do any good, and I tell you so straight. Still, if it pleases you, go ahead."

"Thank you, my friend, you will leave it to me and I shall do my best. But you must help me when I want you."

"Oh, I'll help you fast enough, though *you* will have to do the thinking. Now, what am I to do first?"

"Nothing and do it well. Don't tell a soul about what has taken place to-night. Don't let one of your workmen know anything about it, but in the morning, before they come, look round your backyard and against the wall of the house by the pipe for any marks or anything you can find and let me know all about it. Do they go away for dinner?"

"Yes, from one till two."

"I'll be with you then for a few minutes, but I don't want to be seen here much; and the rest you'll leave to me. I'll catch the villain, have no fear! I've not lived so long among those thieves of Spaniards that my eyes are still shut like those of a baby. And now I go home to sleep. We have done a good night's work, Taft, and I am satisfied." And the Italian rose, finished his whisky and moved towards the door.

"You *are* a funny chap, Balbi, and you have your own ideas, but what they are I'm hanged if I know. I can't see why my place should have been spotted for the job this evening, especially as my men know I don't happen to have much that is worth anything about the place just now—not

half nor a quarter what I have sometimes. But there it is; they've been and they've got nothing. Well, I shall look for you between one and two, and in the meantime I'll have a look round the yard."

At the door the Italian paused a moment as though to say something further, but he refrained, and merely saying "Good-night!" marched off.

As he made his way to his hotel through the silent, deserted streets, he was pondering deeply. He wondered whether he should tell Taft about his discovery of Lucia and of Guelfo's visit to her at her rooms in Hatton Garden, for the former lovers had met since then and Lucia had hidden nothing from Balbi. She had told him how Guelfo, who, according to his own story, had thought her dead until he had accidentally discovered her had appeared very repentant for his former conduct and expressed himself anxious to atone for it by transporting her back to Italy and placing her in a good position, until such time as he could wind up his affairs in England and join her, resuming their married life which he had interrupted in so reprehensive a manner. Balbi wondered if it would be wise to tell Taft all this, and of how he had directed Lucia to give Guelfo no definite answer, but keep him on tenterhooks; not that he believed a word the villain had uttered, for, so far as he knew, Guelfo was unaware of his presence in London or even England. Balbi had a warm friendship for Taft, but notwithstanding this he came to the conclusion that it would not further his ends in any way to admit him into his confidence respecting Lucia, and he therefore concluded he would

keep this matter to himself, at any rate for the present.

The little Italian slept soundly and presented himself at Taft's house next day, at the time appointed. As soon as he was admitted and the door closed behind him, he said,—

"Well, have you discovered anything further? Let me have a look at your backyard now there is no one about."

"Come along! You may be able to make more of things than I do, but there isn't much to see."

"What is the other side of that wall?" asked the Italian, as soon as they were in the yard.

"A vacant plot of land where they have pulled down a lot of old cottages and are going to build a warehouse."

"That's where he came from, no doubt!" And Balbi went close to the wall in question.

"There are no marks there at any rate," said Taft.

"Are there not? What do you call this?" And Balbi scraped something with his knife off the upper edges of some of the bricks.

"Dirt!"

"Nonsense! India - rubber; smell it. The fellow had on a pair of gymnastic or tennis shoes; just the things he would wear, not to make a noise."

Very carefully Balbi went over the ground in the yard, but there were no indications of foot-marks; the slabs with which it was paved had no story to tell. On the other hand the rain-water pipe, running up close to the window of the room

in which the attempt on the safe had been made, was loosened, and some of the nails fixing it to the wall were partially drawn out, leaving a scattering of dry mortar dust on the ground round its foot.

"Well, there's not much after all," said Balbi. "Just enough to prove that our idea as to how he got in was the right one. We must look farther afield. I mustn't stay any longer, or the men will be here in a few minutes and I don't want to be seen. You go in to your dinner and appear as if nothing had happened, and I'll try and get into that next empty yard. It's far more likely I shall get hold of something there."

"Right you are, my friend, I'll leave it to you, but I bet you a new hat the man will be one too many for you and you won't find anything."

"I'm going to try for something worth more than a new hat, Taft—revenge! Revenge for years of wrong and for the life of my friend; that is what is to be my reward. But tell me, can you lend me a measure of some kind—one such as I have seen English workmen use?"

"Certainly, but what for?"

"I've got to play my part. I must look as if I had some business in that place, or I sha'n't get in."

A few minutes later some labourers who were unloading bricks on the vacant plot, paused in their work to watch a stranger who appeared to be very busy over some measurements against the inner boundary wall. He, however, took no notice of them, but went on steadily with his task, climbing over heaps of rubbish and moving minor obstructions which came in his way. It was not

long before Balbi discovered the portion of the wall which backed on to Taft's residence, and it was to this spot that he chiefly confined his attention, measuring and making marks on the brickwork with pieces of slate which he picked up from the rubbish lying around.

Had anyone been close beside him he would have seen that what the Italian picked up on one occasion, and which he appeared to make a mark with, was not a piece of slate at all, and that while transferring it to his pocket a smile of satisfaction played round Balbi's features.

Shortly afterwards he left the place, making some pleasant, casual observation to the labourers in passing, while to himself he muttered,—

"Another link in the chain, another strand in the hangman's rope. My hands cannot be stayed for much longer now, and then — and then!" And he laughed confidently to himself.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WHO WAS IN HOLBORN

NIGHT had fallen and the business portions of London were sinking to that condition of quietude and desertion which forms such a distinct contrast between them and the West-End during the hours of the night. The main arteries of the city were practically empty; a few clerks who had been working overtime, some guests of one of the civic companies in evening dress, and a sprinkling of caretakers and porters occupied the pavements, while a 'bus now and then and a few hansoms rolled over the asphalt.

The exhausted city seemed recouping itself after the labours of the past day of hurried money-making. The lights in the various buildings were mainly in the top storeys, where dwelt those in whose charge they were left. But there might have been seen a light in the office of Guelfo, in Throgmorton Avenue, for the great man had not gone home, but was still there, seated in his padded chair and smoking a big cigar. The table before him was empty of papers. He was doing nothing; and yet, from the way he occasionally drew out his gold repeater and glanced at it, it was clear he was anxiously awaiting something. There was not a sound to be heard in all that vast

building in which his handsome offices were situated. The cleaners had done their work and left; but over the roof came the dull murmur which arises night and day, from year's end to year's end, without interruption, from the heart of the greatest empire the world has seen.

Occasionally Guelfo rose and made his way to a back room, through the window of which a patch of the western sky could be seen, fringed by a lower border of roofs and chimney pots. Up to this he glanced, and then with a muttered expression of disappointment made his way back to his chair.

At length his patience seemed to have reached its limit and, having taken one more glance from the back window, he switched off the electric light, pulled to his office door behind him, and made his way down the echoing stairs and out into the deserted street.

Striking into Queen Victoria Street he sauntered along slowly until he reached the vicinity of Watling Street, and here he came to a pause near the fire brigade station. He stood looking at it for a few minutes and then turned down Queen Street Place, walking quietly to the bottom of the descent. Again he paused to listen and then, retracing his steps, slowly crossed Cannon Street and Queen Victoria Street and, following Queen Street almost as far as Cheapside, doubled once more back to the central point and thence made his way to St Paul's Churchyard.

It was while he was thus engaged that a sound fell upon his ear and made him stop—a sound that is known to every true Londoner and which

never fails to command attention—a mingling of clattering hoofs, shouts of a particular kind, jingling of harness and bells and a rattle of wheels.

In an instant all lethargy had disappeared from Guelfo's movements; he was instinct with vitality and life as he hurried back to the opening of Watling Street in time to see the steam fire-engine, with its well-groomed, eager steeds and complement of brass-helmeted men, dash from the open door and, turning to the right, sweep along westward. The incident was nothing to those whose occupation kept them in the neighbourhood, but for Guelfo it had a particular fascination. He had been waiting for it for hours. It marked a step in the scheme to which his brain had given birth, a scheme on which he deemed his future happiness depended.

Quickly he made his way through the narrow lanes and courts which furrow that portion of the city till he found himself in Newgate Street. Hurrying along he paused on the viaduct to gaze on the blood-red glare against which the buildings on his right hand were silhouetted. There was a fierce fire taking place close by. The air that beat upon his face, where he stood, was thick with the fumes of burning. Great clouds of smoke were rolling towards him, flecked here and there with glowing embers, while the roar of the flames, as of a mighty furnace, could be distinctly heard. The street, till now practically empty, was thronged with hurrying people, who seemed to have sprung from nowhere, all making for one point. Guelfo did not follow them, but descending one of the sets of covered steps found himself in Farringdon

Street. Here one or two engines were just drawing up, and their complements of men, with the rapidity gained by long practice, were joining long, serpent-like coils of hose and connecting water-mains with snorting engines, and evolving method and order out of seeming chaos. It was a scene to compel admiration and wonder, but Guelfo did not pause. Instead, he made his way through the crowd, before the police had time to form a cordon, hurried up the street in the direction of Clerkenwell and then turning to the left threaded several small allies and lanes from which no view of the conflagration could be obtained and which were, in consequence, empty and deserted. So he got quite close to the seat of the fire in Saffron Hill.

Here he found himself wedged in amongst a crowd of excited, gesticulating foreigners, who for the most part, judging from their language, were Italians. The police were in strong force here, and were holding them back, while within the cordon, mingling among the firemen, were those who had rooms near the burning premises, and who were frantically endeavouring to save some of their poor belongings.

Every now and then a lane would be forced through the crowd, to admit of the wheeling away of a piano-organ or the passage of a man or woman bearing a bundle of bedding or clothing, or leading a half-dressed child screaming with terror. And these would return again after depositing their burdens in safety to endeavour to save something more. Taking advantage of one of these openings, Guelfo, who for him was shabbily dressed, and was vociferating loudly in Italian, passed the cordon

and gained the comparatively empty space within.

He was now able to see that the fire was not entirely confined to the one house which, from the inflammable nature of its contents, was burning like a furnace. The house next it was catching alight, and already flames were bursting through the roof, while through the panes in the upper windows, broken by the heat, dense masses of black smoke were pouring.

The tenants, like a colony of disturbed ants, were dragging through the doorway furniture, bedding, and anything they were able to secure from the lower rooms which, so far, appeared to have escaped the flames.

Suddenly there was a pause and ~~then~~ an exclamation of horror surged through the throng of workers as the query which meant so much—"Where's Lucia?"—passed from mouth to mouth. Playing his part, Guelfo repeated the words, but answered himself beneath his breath, "In heaven or hell by this time, I should say!"

Hardly had the query been repeated before the cordon at one part of the street had been swept aside, and a man, eluding the grasp of the police, dashed forward and sprang into the doorway of the house. Frantic voices called on him to come back. The staircase was on fire! The roof was falling. The place was an oven above the ground floor! Nothing could live there! Three or four firemen dashed in after him, but they came staggering back, driven out by the smoke and terrible heat. A kind of silence fell on the on-lookers, a silence of horror, the tension of which

was only broken by the arrival of the first escape. Instantly all was noise and excitement again as it was hurried down the street and placed against the top windows of the house.

Up ran the firemen, hatchet in hand, to break a way in, and the eyes of the crowd were following their every movement, when from the doorway below reeled a form, bearing something on the shoulders, only to fall a huddled, inanimate mass in the roadway.

With a curse on his lips Guelfo dashed forward with others, and separating the two forms, his eyes fell upon the scorched and smoke-stained features of the man whom he had done his best to swindle, and whom till recently he had believed to be thousands of miles away, in the heart of Peru. He turned from him, and as the others raised the apparently lifeless body of a woman, he came to a sudden determination, and, acting on it, exclaimed in Italian,—

“Someone fetch a cab. She may still be alive! She must go to the hospital. I will see to her; she is a countrywoman of mine. Leave her to me and save what you can yourselves.” He spoke with an air of authority, and the poor folk about him, recognising that he was not one of themselves though a compatriot, obeyed him.

With the help of two men he bore her through the crowd, and as he did so he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a voice in his ear,—

“No good, then?”

Turning his head quickly he found Reichardt beside him. Ignoring the query, Guelfo said,—

“Come with me; there’s work to do!” and

moved his hands so that the newcomer might take his share in bearing the burden.

In a neighbouring street they found the cab waiting and, dismissing the other helpers with a few coins and many words of thanks, he and Reichardt entered the cab, supporting the inanimate body of Lucia between them. Shouting to the driver "The Royal Free!" the door was slammed and the cab moved away in the direction of Gray's Inn Lane.

For the next few moments Guelfo and Reichardt conversed rapidly in low tones, and when the main street was reached, the cabman was informed that the woman was recovering rapidly, and there would be no need for her to go to the hospital. But as her own rooms were burnt out they ~~would~~ instead take her to the house of one of her friends in Pratt Street, Camden Town, who would shelter her until she could make fresh arrangements.

It mattered nothing to the cabman so long as he got his fare, and as he drove on, past King's Cross, the rapid conversation in the cab was continued.

"It *must* be managed," Guelfo was saying, "and if you do as I tell you it will be the best night's work you have ever done in your life."

"But how long will she be like this?" asked Reichardt.

"Forty-eight hours at least, if your man carried out his work properly."

"He did; I've seen him since. He's going to lie low for a bit now." •

"Right!. Here's Pratt Street. There's no one about. I'll get her out and you hold her up and

talk to her while I pay and send off the cabman. Make out you can't be sure of the number of her friend's house."

The two men carried out their infamous design to the letter, and as the cabman drove off with three times his proper fare, Guelfo and Reichardt appeared to be carefully helping the tottering steps of the woman into one of the gardens before the houses.

As soon as he had disappeared Guelfo hurried off and fetched another cab in which Lucia was placed, and a fresh journey commenced. This ended in the far east of London, at a house the inmates of which appeared to be thoroughly well known to Reichardt.

Early the following morning a private carriage drove up to the door and an elderly man, having the appearance of a doctor, descended and entered the house, shortly afterwards reappearing with his patient, who seemed in a dazed, semi-conscious and very weak condition, and the carriage containing them, with the addition of Reichardt, drove rapidly away.

When Balbi recovered consciousness he found his arms and hands swathed in bandages and all was darkness before his eyes.

"What's the matter? Where am I?" he inquired in a weak voice.

"Hush! You must not talk; just lie still and go to sleep again. You've been very ill and are still weak," replied a pleasant voice, the owner of which he could not see.

"But what's the matter? Am I blind?"

"No, only your eyes were terribly scorched and

you must not use them for a time. Now, I shall not speak to you any more. You *must* keep quiet and go to sleep." And he heard soft footsteps leaving his side.

But sleep was not for him then. All desire for it had left him. As he lay there in the darkness, recent events came rushing back to his mind. He remembered how he had seen the engine dashing down Holborn, how he had followed and found the fire devouring the house where he knew Lucia was, how he had heard the words, "Where is Lucia?" and had burst through the crowd and police and into the burning house. Then the mad rush up the stairs through the choking black fumes, the struggle with the lock on her door, the awful shock as he caught sight of her in the glass lying dressed but apparently dead across her bed, the scorching heat that seemed to lick the flesh from his face and hands as he seized her and, laying her over his shoulder, commenced his descent. And what a descent was that! Every breath an agony, every step a weakening of his powers! Would his strength hold out? His legs faltered, his arms seemed to be losing their grasp on his burden, he was choking, his eyesight was failing so that he could not tell where he was going, and then all was darkness and he knew no more.

And now everything was still dark. Had he saved her or had his efforts been all in vain?

He could not endure the suspense longer. He endeavoured to call someone, but his voice sounded distant and weak. Then he heard steps.

"Tell me where I am. I must know; I cannot rest."

"You are in the Royal Free Hospital. You were hurt in a fire in Saffron Hill," replied the same gentle voice.

"Yes, yes! But is she alive—did I save her?"

"Save whom?"

"Lucia—Lucia Malfi."

"I don't know I'm sure, but don't talk; there's a good man."

"I must know, I tell you. Find out for me, for the love of Heaven. I can't rest until I know. She was more hurt than me. Find out if Lucia Malfi is here. She must be."

The nurse, seeing how agitated her patient was, promised to go and make inquiries. It was some time before she returned. He heard her footsteps and turned his head at the sound.

"Is she here?" he whispered.

"No, there is no one of the name you mentioned in the hospital. She was injured in the fire and they started to bring her here, but she never arrived, and no one knows what has become of her. I am sorry, but that is all I can learn."

With a groan Balbi turned away, and then in a low voice he said,—

"I will do all you tell me, nurse, only get me well soon. I have more work to do."

CHAPTER XVII

IN REGENT'S PARK

"WHAT'S the matter with you, father? You're not looking at all well. The heat is trying you, I expect. I shall be glad when we go down to Oxendale again. There's no place like dear old Kent in the summer."

"Yes, my dear, I sha'n't be sorry to get away from town, more especially if I can only leave my worries behind me; but I fear I can't."

"Worries, father? What is the matter? Nothing serious, I hope."

"My dear Berkeley, you've not mentioned them to me. What is the matter?" asked Lady Oxendale.

Viscount Oxendale, his wife and daughter were seated at lunch in the shady dining-room in Mount Street. The glare of the street was softened by the half-drawn blinds, but still the heated, dusty atmosphere crept in at the open windows and seemed to deprive his lordship of his appetite, for he had pushed aside his hardly-touched food and turning half round in his chair had leaned his elbow on the back and was resting his head on his hand. His wife, a fragile-looking lady, always more or less of an invalid, looked at him anxiously across the table as she made the last remark.

"No, Letitia, I didn't bother you about them. You have quite enough to do to take care of yourself without troubling about me."

"Well, of course, Berkeley, you have a head for such matters and I understand nothing about them, so I must leave them to you."

"Quite right, my dear, quite right; the City can have no interest for you."

Pauline was watching her father closely and turned the conversation quickly by reminding him that he had promised to take her that evening to the Botanical Fête.

"Did I, my dear, then of course I will. But I had quite forgotten all about it."

It was half an hour later, when Lady Oxendale had retired for her afternoon rest, that Pauline entered her father's study and, seating herself in a chair by the table, said,—

"Now, father, what is all this about? You're going to tell me, so make a clean breast of it at once."

"It's really nothing after all, only it bothers me. I'm horribly short of money just now. The rents have not been coming in as they should have done, and the expenses of living in town during the season are no joke. I would have sold out, but it would entail a heavy loss just now. You see I have in a measure allowed myself to be guided by Guelfo lately, and I've dipped rather more heavily than I ought."

"Oh, father, I've told you before you should avoid that man's financial schemes. I don't trust him at all. He's not square and straightforward, I am certain."

"But, Pauline, being on the directorate of so many companies, I am continually coming in contact with him, and he certainly does possess a great name for making money in the City."

"Yes, yes, I know. But there are honest and dishonest ways of making it. Tell me; what is it you want to sell out?"

"Those Peruvian mine shares. It was a pet scheme of Guelfo's and he induced me to go in for them heavily, and now they've gone down to almost nothing."

"Do you mean 'The Queen of the Cordilleras'?"

"Yes."

"But, dear old dad, I warned you especially against having anything to do with it."

"You did; but what could you know about it?"

"Hadn't poor Wallace been out there?" with a deep sigh. "But what has caused the slump? There must be some reason."

"Well, I've heard some people have been unloading all they'd got lately, and for another thing there have been curious reports going about. It seems it is not turning out nearly so well as the promoters and experts expected or declared it would."

"And you hold largely?"

"Some seven thousand pounds' worth."

"Father!"

"Unfortunately I do, my dear."

Pauline sat silent for some minutes, gazing at the pattern on the carpet and then said,—

"What are they? Five pound shares?"

"Yes."

"What is their price now?"

“One pound fifteen, and falling still.”

Again there was a lengthy silence, broken at last by the girl rising and saying brightly,—

“You will have to put the matter in my hands, father, and see what I can do. I’m not quite such an ignoramus as you may think, and if you want any money in the meantime I can let you have some, thanks to dear Wallace’s generosity.”

“Bless you, my girl, for thinking of such a thing, but I shall pull along somehow, no doubt.”

“Very well, but don’t forget to come to me if I can help you. And now you are not going to worry any more about it, and we’ll have a good time together this evening at the Fête.”

The weather proved as unexceptional as the Botanical committee could have desired. It was a cloudless night, warm and balmy, without a breath of wind—a night on which the exquisite creations of the season could be displayed by their owners to their envious and less fortunate sisters beneath the glow of the thousands of lights on the lawns without the protecting and nullifying covering of wraps and opera cloaks. The gardens in Regent’s Park were crowded. The strains of music from different quarters mingled with the hum of light-hearted conversation and laughter, as groups of acquaintances met and stopped to exchange a few words and then passed on to find other friends.

Pauline and Viscount Oxendale were strolling up and down the lawn near one of the tents in which were grouped an exhibition of roses, when Dora Colvin and Gerald Mildmay suddenly came upon them. They stood chatting for a few moments together and then Dora said,—

"Pauline, I'm going to carry off Lord Oxendalè to see a new lily in one of the houses. Gerald will take care of you. We sha'n't be long and will meet somewhere about here."

"Very well; I think I can trust myself to you, Gerald," said Pauline, with a smile.

"I think you may. We're not on the river now and I don't see that lubber, Guelfo, anywhere about."

"Poor man! wasn't he distressed at his awkwardness that evening?"

"So he ought to have been. You might have been drowned."

"He called every day for a week afterwards and sent me lovely flowers and bonbons and goodness knows what, as if I were a child."

"Did he? I'd have burnt the lot if I'd been you. I hate the fellow. He's a wrong 'un, if I know one."

"You're rather hard on him, I think, Gerald."

"I don't like him, and what I saw the other day didn't raise my idea of him." And Mildmay gave his companion an account of the interview he had witnessed in the upper room in Saffron Hill a short time previously, concluding with, "Now, what can you make of that? Nothing good, I fear."

"It sounds curious, certainly, but then you say she looked like a countrywoman of his."

"She did, but, from the appearance of the room, she was clearly not hard up or anything of that kind, and I should say she was a respectable woman, and that made it all the more puzzling what she could have to do with Guelfo."

“It does sound odd. But didn’t I see something in the paper about a fire in Saffron Hill some time since?”

“Rather! The house next the one where Guelfo’s friend lived—a warehouse from what I could judge—caught fire and it spread to the next one and both were burnt out.”

“Then you’ve seen nothing of her since?”

“Nothing. We’ve finished the job at Ford Brothers, and I have no excuse for going there now. Not that I want to, only it struck me as very curious that I should have been the witness of what I’ll bet was the last thing Guelfo would have liked any of his friends to see.”

“Have you told anyone of this?” asked Pauline, thoughtfully.

“No, I haven’t; not even Dora.”

“Then don’t, Gerald. Oblige me by keeping it a secret for a time. I have a good reason for asking this, which I’m sure you won’t mind my not divulging at present.”

“Of course not, and I’ll promise to keep the matter entirely to myself. Well, Lord Oxendale, what do you think of the lily?” as Dora and Pauline’s father emerged from the crowd of promenaders in company with Ellis, whom they had just previously encountered.

“Grand! one of the most beautiful blossoms I ever saw. I wish our climate would admit of their growing in the open air. I’d soon have some on the lake at Oxendale.”

Pauline had meanwhile shaken hands with Ellis, whom she had not met since the day of the water-party at Taplow.

"And you have felt no ill effects of your accident?" he was asking.

"None, thank you. Your kindness in so quickly procuring me a dry rig-out from somewhere obviated all chance of that. I was only too sorry to have been the cause of any interruption of the festivities."

"You! Miss Spencer, you have no cause to take that on your shoulders. It was Quelfo and his clumsiness. What he can have been dreaming of I can't conceive. He doesn't generally lose his head in the way he did that evening." They were strolling slightly in advance of the others at the time. "I can't tell you, Miss Spencer, what my feelings were when I saw your canoe upset and you in the water. How I envied Mr Karmick his promptitude in going to the rescue!"

"Say no more about it, Mr Ellis. It was nothing after all—just an accident which might happen to anyone, and which, thanks to Providence, brought no serious misfortune in its train."

"No, Miss Spencer, I can't regard it as lightly as that. You don't realise what it might have meant to me. If anything had happened to you while you were my guest, or, indeed, at any other time, it would have been the death-blow to hopes which I am powerless to prevent taking root in my heart and which—"

But Pauline had stopped in her walk, and looking straight in Ellis's eyes, said,—

"I must ask you not to say any more, Mr Ellis. Remember how short a time it is since the grave closed over one who was dearer to me than

anything else on earth. I think you will understand."

"I ask your pardon, Miss Spencer. My feelings got the better of my tongue; for the present I will be silent, at whatever cost to myself, but a man cannot control his hopes, and at some future time, perhaps—"

But Pauline stopped him with a gesture. "Say no more, Mr Ellis. It is very painful to me. We have known each other some time now. Allow the matter to rest there. I will join my father, if you please." And, waiting till the others came up, Pauline took Lord Oxendale's arm, while Ellis walked beside Dora Colvin.

For some time longer the party remained together, visiting various tents containing the exhibits, and occasionally sitting down to listen to one or other of the finest bands of the English army. It was almost midnight when, Dora having found her father and mother, the whole party made a move to the exit where the long rows of carriages were drawn up closely together.

The Colvins' carriage was the first which answered the summons, and, good-nights having been said, drove off, leaving Gerald Mildmay still talking to Lord Oxendale and his daughter. Ellis had not spoken to Pauline since the conversation between them earlier in the evening, but he too lingered beside her as though unable to tear himself away.

It was while they stood thus, waiting on the gravel pathway outside the gardens, between two living hedges of loafers and onlookers, that Pauline was astonished to see both Mildmay

and Ellis start perceptibly at the same moment, and, glancing at the crowd to ascertain the cause, she could distinguish nothing extraordinary to account for it. It was the usual collection of members of the lower classes who congregate wherever there is any chance of seeing the toilettes of those who are better dressed than themselves. The majority of those looking on consisted of women, but at the back of the throng Pauline particularly noticed the faces of two men. She would probably not have given them a second thought had she not observed that both of them were regarding her companions intently.

The Oxendale brougham drew up at that moment, and as Gerald took leave of Pauline, he whispered,—

“When next I see you remind me to tell you something.”

As soon as Ellis and Mildmay had parted with their friends they showed no inclination to remain in company. A sudden stiffness and reserve seemed to come between them, and the former, preparing to cross the road, said,—

“Well, good-night, Mildmay! I’m going this way.”

“Good-night, Ellis, I shall make for home, too.” And, edging his way through the crowd, Gerald passed to the more open space beyond, where he stopped and lit a cigar, all the time keeping his eyes on the throng he had just passed through.

“I could swear to the fellow again,” he muttered; “it’s a face I shall never forget. Funny I should

have come across him once more, directly after having mentioned him to Pauline. Moses! I wonder if he had anything to do with that fire. It started in the house where he was. He's moving off. I'm hanged if I don't see where he goes to and do a little bit of Sherlock Holmes." And, retracing his steps, Mildmay commenced to shadow the two men who had turned away from the crowd by the entrance gates.

Little as Mildmay was aware of it, someone else was also keeping a watch upon the same men, walking parallel with them, but upon the far side of the road, hidden by the ranks of carriages. Ellis had recognised the man he had first seen at Guelfo's office in Paris, and with whom he had ~~crossed~~ the Channel the following day, though the other no longer wore the blue glass pince-nez.

That this man was in some way connected with Guelfo Ellis knew for certain; that he had given Guelfo Vipan's letter, Ellis half suspected; that he was the thief who had relieved him of the curious emblem he had picked up, he had little doubt, and now that there was a chance of learning something more about him, Ellis determined to avail himself of it. And so the four men moved onward, the followed and the followers, until the Outer Circle was reached, when, as those in front turned down towards Portland Place, Ellis crossed the road to find himself once more alongside Mildmay.

"Hollo! I thought you were going the other way," he said, with a laugh.

"So I was, but I changed my mind, and now

we have met once more, we may as well walk together as far as our ways coincide."

"By all means."

And thus stern Fate decreed that certain matters which had hitherto been hidden should remain hidden still.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LION'S DEN

"Ah, signorina, it is very good of you to have come so quickly in answer to my request."

"Not at all, Signor Balbi, I should have been here long ago had I only known of your misfortune. We are friends, are we not? You should have sent me word sooner."

Fauntine Spencer was seated beside Balbi, who, with his face still partially hidden beneath bandages, was reclining on a chair in the hospital garden.

"At first I could not collect my senses. I knew not where I was or what had happened. My eyesight had gone; I was useless—a log of wood—nothing. I knew not, I thought not, I cared not. It was enough for me to take what was given me and lie still. Then I began to remember and to think, and then it was I found how helpless I had become. Ah!" and the Italian gave vent to a sound which more resembled the savage growl of an animal than anything else, "and I have so much to do!" he continued.

"And I perhaps may be able to help you if I only know how. You must not forget, signore, how we are both pledged to the accomplishment of the same object."

"No, no, I do not forget ; that comes first. But there are other things which have come into my life since then, and they seem as though they were all strands of the rope which shall prove the murderer's doom."

"Then you have found out something since I last saw you."

"I have come across a page of my life which I thought closed for ever, signorina, and of which you know nothing."

"May I not know more about it?"

The Italian remained silent for a time, lost in thought, then he said,—

"Yes, you shall know all. You may be able to help while I am laid aside as useless."

"You may be quite sure I shall do all I can. Look on me as representing him who has been taken from us; treat me as you would have treated him, and you will find I shall act as he would have done."

"I know it."

For the next hour the two friends were in earnest conversation, Balbi doing the chief part of the talking, Pauline occasionally interrupting him to ask questions or to throw in an observation. She heard the whole story of Lucia, and Guelfo's treachery; of Balbi's discovery of his lost love and their renewed happiness until the evening of the catastrophe.

"But how came you to be present at the time?" asked Pauline.

"I was strolling quietly along Holborn when I saw the engine tearing past. I had never seen a fire in your great city and, like a child, I ran after

it. It went in the direction of Saffron Hill. A great fear filled my heart. Could it be that there was danger to her I loved? I tore on down the steps, flinging the idle, gaping sightseers aside like straws, forcing my way through the throng as one possessed, and then, when I was close to the burning houses, I heard the name of Lucia mentioned. No one knew where she was; she might still be in the house. The idiots, the pigs! they could save chairs and tables, but they could not try to save a fellow-being. With a curse on my lips I flung the last barrier aside, and rushed into the house. I found her and made my way back, and then I knew no more until I came to my senses here. Then all was dark and I was helpless ~~and~~ she was not with me."

"Was she not brought here?"

"No, I have asked, and one of the nurses has written to her at the old address, but the letter has come back marked, 'Gone away!' She is lost to me again, and I can do nothing."

"But *I* can, signor. You will soon be yourself once more, and till then, leave the matter to me and I will do all in my power. Do not worry; only make haste to get well. Remember so much depends on that."

Still the pair talked on. Pauline had much to tell the Italian, and not an item did she omit. She had seen Gerald Mildmay the previous day and had heard from him about what had happened after parting with him on the night of the Botanical Fête. To Balbi she related what Gerald had told her of the interview between Guelfo and Lucia, and endeavoured to give him a description of the

two men she had seen as she was leaving the gardens. But her description conveyed nothing to Balbi's mind ; he did not recognise the men in the least. Yet it was something that a friend had seen them and would know them again. It was a step in advance.

From this the conversation turned to the mines in Peru, and Balbi heard how the shares in the "Queen of the Cordilleras" had gone down to almost nothing, and how strange rumours were afloat concerning it.

"I knew it! I knew it must be so," he said, and then went on to speak of the flotation of the other mine on which he pinned his faith. As soon as he was about again he would see to it. Pauline would give him introductions to trustworthy men, and money—heaps of money—should be made. And so the conversation went on until, seeing the invalid was growing weary, Pauline took her leave, promising to see him again shortly.

It was some days later that the clerks in Guelfo's office in Throgmorton Avenue were surprised by the entrance of a lady inquiring for the financier.

"Yes, madam, Mr Guelfo is in. What name shall I say?"

"Miss Stanley."

Pauline had not to wait many minutes before the inner door was thrown open, and Guelfo himself appeared.

"Why, this is an unexpected honour! Pray come in."

Pauline bowed, ignoring the hand held out to her, and entered the sanctum.

"And now, what can I do for you, Miss—?"

"Mr Guelfo," said Pauline, interrupting him shortly, "my visit is purely a business one, and as it is said there is no friendship in business, we will maintain a strictly business position, if you please."

Guelfo was quick to notice the tone in which this remark was made, and was puzzled.

"Certainly, Miss Spencer, business is business and should be regarded as such, though few ladies are as practical as you are, I fear. But I must say that any business I may be fortunate enough to transact for you will, at the same time, afford me the greatest pleasure. Now, in what way can I serve you?"

"Mr Guelfo, it is not for myself that I am here, but on behalf of another who knows nothing of my visit. I thought it best to give a name to the clerks which was not my own."

Guelfo was interested and not quite at his ease.

"Pray, explain yourself, Miss Spencer," he said.

"By your advice my father has invested in the Peruvian mine which you have exploited, the 'Queen of the Cordilleras'."

"Ah!"

"The shares in that mine have now fallen to almost nothing."

"They have, but only temporarily, only temporarily, my dear young lady. It is a splendid property, I can assure you."

"I am glad to hear it; it makes my task lighter. My father is anxious to dispose of his holding."

"Certainly, he will have no difficulty."

"But at the price he bought at."

"Ah, well, you see, just now there has been a

slump—a fall in mining shares, and this mine has suffered with the rest.”

“Then, though I am not very much *au fait* in stock-dealing, this, I believe, is an excellent time to buy.”

“Yes, in all good properties, excellent !”

“You will then, no doubt, seize the opportunity and relieve Lord Oxendale of his holding?”

“But, Miss Spencer, I am not buying just now. I hold a very large proportion of the shares as it is.”

“Then a few thousands more or less will make no difference to you.”

“Excuse me, but that is a matter on which *I* am the best judge.”

“Certainly, but you will kindly arrange this matter. My father’s shares must be taken off his hands at the price he paid for them.” Pauline spoke firmly, looking straight in the financier’s eyes.

“You are asking somewhat of an impossibility, my dear young lady.”

“I don’t think you will find it so.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Mr Guelfo. It will not matter to Lord Oxendale whether you find him a purchaser or take them yourself at the price he paid for them.”

“Oh, absurd! You clearly are not familiar with the mining market or you would not suggest such a thing.”

“I don’t profess to be. Still, I believe you will relieve my father as I have suggested.”

“I can disabuse your mind on that point at

once," replied Guelfo, beginning to show signs of anger. "I shall most certainly not do so."

"I think you will, Mr Guelfo—"

"No, Miss Spencer, as you said just now business is business and that would not be business; it would be—excuse the expression—'tommy rot'."

"You will remember, Mr Guelfo, it was entirely on your recommendation my father invested in the mine."

"Your father is a hard-headed man, Miss Spencer; he knows what he is about as well as any of us."

"He can be misled."

"Do you mean to imply that I misled him in ~~this case~~?" snapped Guelfo.

"If you put it in that way—well, I do!"

"Then I have no more to say."

"But I have. I am not going to be put off in that way."

"Really, I am at a loss to understand your conduct; it is the last I should ever have expected on your part, and had you been anyone else I should not have suffered you to say what you have to me."

Guelfo had grown crimson in the face. He was fighting hard to control the temper which was rapidly gaining a mastery over him. And all the time Pauline was sitting unmoved, with her eyes fixed on him unflinchingly.

She listened till he had finished and then said very quietly,—

"Take care, Mr Guelfo! Take care. Don't force my hand."

"Force your hand! What do you mean? Now look here, young lady, I've had about enough of this. I'm not accustomed to be spoken to in this way and I won't stand it, even from you."

"Very well; I am to understand you will not relieve my father of the shares he holds in your mine. Is that so?"

"It is distinctly and emphatically—"

"I shall then be forced to speak to another purchaser in—let us say, Saffron Hill."

"You may seek one in—where did you say?" exclaimed Guelfo, the words commencing in bluster and dying away in a tone of surprise and uneasiness.

"I only mentioned Saffron Hill as being a locality in which your countrymen congregate; and there might be someone among them who would be sufficiently interested in a project of yours to wish to participate in it."

Very closely did Guelfo watch his visitor's face as she spoke, but he read nothing there. It might have been a mask for all the indication of the thoughts which lay behind it.

He picked up a paper knife and commenced playing with it. Pauline was quick to see her shot had gone home.

The financier straightened himself in his chair as he replied,—

"Saffron Hill! That only shows how little you are acquainted with the subject. No one there has any money. You may save yourself the trouble."

Pauline leaned over the table and said in a low

tone, "There is a certain lady there who would be very interested in her husband's venture."

Do what he would the man could not suppress the start her words had caused him. He half rose from his chair; his hand went to the button in the arm, but he refrained from pushing it, and with a violent effort he recovered himself, replying in a jeering voice,—

"Well, and what cock-and-bull story have you got hold of?"

"I do not doubt it. All the same I—"

"Enough, miss, you have my answer and I cannot give you any more time this morning. I am particularly engaged."

"As you will, Mr Guelfo. I will not detain you any longer. I am to understand then you refuse to purchase these shares and that I am to be compelled to look elsewhere for a purchaser?"

Guelfo rose and commenced striding up and down the room as he said,—

"You can do just what you like, and I don't care a tinker's curse what you do; it is a matter of perfect indifference to me. But if you think I am going to be saddled with shares that anyone wants to get rid of, just to oblige them, you are mightily mistaken. You have come to the wrong quarter for that kind of thing, young lady. Your father bought with his eyes open and he must stand the racket like the rest of us. It is a great mistake women attempting to meddle in matters they don't understand."

Pauline had also risen, and as she moved towards the door she said quietly,—

"I think you have made your intentions quite

clear, Mr Guelfo. You do not intend to relieve Lord Oxendale, and I must therefore take my own course. I am convinced those shares will be disposed of very quickly. Good-morning, Mr Guelfo!" And with a smile and a nod she left the room.

"Curse the woman!" exclaimed Guelfo, the moment the door closed upon her. "Where in the name of the devil has she found out anything—for she has come upon something, it's quite clear. Can Reichardt have played me false? I doubt it; he has too much at stake. But I'll find out. Has she actually come across Lucia? That too is very improbable. I have it—Balbi!" For a moment or two the man stood perfectly still, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and then with all the excitement and fire of his Southern nature he burst out, "Dolt, idiot that I have been! Of course it is he! and I never recognised him though there was something about the face that was familiar from the first. But five-and-twenty years is a long time to remember a face that one has only seen half-a-dozen times. Balbi it is! He was the friend of Vipan. Vipan was Pauline's *fiancé*. Balbi is in England, and what more natural than that he should see Pauline. Lucia is safe. Balbi must be made safe too—and I can manage it. I *will* manage it. Those two out of the way my path will be clear. In the meantime, is it to be war to the knife with Pauline or the accommodating friend? I must think it out. Money is not too easy with that infernal balance sheet of the 'Belgravian Estate Syndicate' all on the wrong side to be cooked or jockeyed somehow before the meeting comes off. But I'll

manage it. I've got out of tighter corners than this before, and if, Pauline Spencer, I am compelled to allow you to think you have scored one in this instance it will only be by my cursed ill-luck and not by your own cleverness. You shall be mine before the end of the game."

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

"MEET me on the up platform of Blackfriars Station, Underground, at 3.30 this afternoon. Important. H. R."

Such were the contents of a particularly dirty envelope which the postman delivered at Mr Guelfo's office about noon one day, shortly after the interview described in the last chapter.

"A try for more money, I suppose," muttered the financier, with a curl of his lip, as he glanced over the words. "But I'll put a stop to this once and for all," and to the clerk who had brought in the missive he said, "Make no appointment for me between three and half-past four this afternoon. I shall not be in."

Punctually at the time mentioned, Guelfo, having purchased a first-class ticket to New Cross, descended the stairs and found himself in the gloom of the Underground line. It was some minutes before his eyes became accustomed to the murkiness and sulphur-laden atmosphere and he was able to distinguish the form of his correspondent at the far end of the platform.

Reichardt had seen him and advanced to meet him.

"What have you brought me to this rat-hole for?" asked Guelfo, dispensing with any manner of greeting. "Why couldn't you come and see me at my office? Do you think I have nothing else to do but run about in odd corners after you? Eh?"

"You won't say that directly, I fancy," replied the man, confidently, with a strong Teutonic accent. "I asked you to come here because it is dark, and it is as well we shouldn't be seen much together. I've got to make myself scarce for a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Read that," and Reichardt handed a morning paper to Guelfo, indicating an advertisement with his finger. At that moment a train entered the station.

"Get in here," said Guelfo, opening the door of an unoccupied, first-class compartment; "we can talk better. If anyone that I know gets in, I'll take out my handkerchief, and then don't notice me but get out when I do."

As soon as the train was in motion Guelfo examined the paper given him and read:—

"WANTE^d, the cabman who drove an Italian woman, who was injured in the fire which occurred in Eyre Street, Saffron Hill, on the 13th of last month. Apply to the caretaker, 23B Old Broad Street. Time and trouble will be fully recompensed."

Reichardt watched his man closely as he read, and when Guelfo lowered the paper said,—

"Nasty, ain't it?"

"Do you know the cabman?" asked Guelfo, ignoring the remark.

"I know his number and can find him, no doubt."

"Do so. Ascertain if he has seen this, and if so, let him understand that it will be to his advantage *not* to have seen it. Do you comprehend?"

"But if I can't square him?"

"You're no fool, Reichardt. Every man has his price; you know that. And in the meantime you shall take his place."

"How do you mean?"

"You shall answer the advertisement and, if needful, play the part of the cabman. We shall then see who is at the bottom of the affair, and can easily throw them off the scent." •

"I don't half like it; it's too risky."

"Don't you? You'll have to do it all the same, my friend. It's not a question of—"

Guelfo's handkerchief came out with a flourish, and he threw the paper across to Reichardt as, the train drawing up at Mark Lane, the door opened and a man got in and entered into conversation with Guelfo as far as Whitechapel. When they were once more alone the financier said,—

"Well, have your views altered?"

"I'll do it if I must," replied Reichardt, sullenly.

"That's right! You won't regret it, and you may rely on me to keep you safe and make it worth your while. I don't see that at present there is any need for your getting out of the way, and you may be very useful here. Come to me in the Albany this evening and let me hear how you

have got on. It will require careful handling, no doubt, but you are just the man to manage it. I'll get out here and go back. You go on for another station or two," and putting several sovereigns in the German's hand Guelfo left the train.

On his return to his office he gave orders that he was not to be disturbed on any account, and entering his own room he set to work to think hard over the situation. By the aid of the directory he learned the names of the various tenants at 23B Old Broad Street, but among them he could recognise no one who, as far as he could tell, would take any interest in his wife. That his secret was no longer his own had been proved by Pauline's visit, and though he had so far taken no further notice of it, it now occurred to him that it would be as well not to make an enemy of her, and he accordingly wrote to Viscount Oxendale, informing him that if he were anxious to dispose of his holding in the "Queen of the Cordilleras" he was willing to take the shares off his hands and that, as it was by his advice the investment had been made, he would stretch a point and give the Viscount the same price as that at which he had bought.

"That'll square the minx, I should think," Guelfo muttered, throwing down his pen, "and it's worth it, though shelling out that amount just now is infernally awkward. Never mind! it won't be I who will pay for it; it only means bleeding some other unfortunate devil. How they *do* trust me!" and he gave vent to a very unmelodious laugh.

That evening about nine, as he was sitting smoking in his chambers in the Albany, Reichardt was shown in.

"Well, how have you got on?" Guelfo inquired eagerly, as soon as his man had closed the door.

"I found the man and squared him. He hadn't seen the advertisement, but I thought it best, after sounding him, to show it to him. He didn't want the trouble of attending to it; thought it might lead to a trial or police-court job and his losing time. He was therefore quite ready to be paid for keeping quiet."

"How much does he want?"

"A fiver, but I said—"

"Give it to him, for Heaven's sake!" and Guelfo passed a bank-note across the table. "You think he's square?"

"Oh, yes. He'll do nothing."

"Very well; now sit down at that table and copy this letter on that sheet of paper."

"It's torn and dirty," said Reichardt, taking his seat.

"Of course it is. Cabmen don't usually write on Bond Street stationery, do they? You'll gather as you write what you are expected to do."

"But—"

"Not a word; do as I tell you. You've only to obey me and then I'm responsible. I'll take care of you; trust me for that."

Reichardt made the copy and handed it to Guelfo, who ran his eye over it. "That'll do. Address the envelope." Then, "By-the-bye, what about an address for the answer?"

"There's a little shop in Dean Street where they take in letters."

"That'll do; put it in."

Reichardt did as he was bade and handed the sheet to Guelfo.

"So! I'll see to the posting. You'll probably hear in a couple of days' time, making some appointment. Let me see the answer and we'll settle details. In the meantime, get yourself a rig-out as like a cabman's as possible. You know the kind of thing better than I can tell you. That will be all to-night, I think. Let me know the moment you get an answer."

"I will."

"Good-night, and keep your mouth closed."

It was three days before Guelfo saw Reichardt again and then he came to him in his chambers.

"Well, any news?"

"Yes, this came this morning." And Reichardt handed a daintily little note to Guelfo, who read it aloud:—

"THE HAWTHORNS, GRAHAM PLACE,

"REGENT'S PARK, N.W.

"MRS SAMSON is much obliged to John Drew for his letter and would be further obliged if he would call on her at the above address to-morrow evening or, if that is not convenient, the following evening, after seven o'clock. John Drew will lose nothing by so doing."

Guelfo was puzzled. He could make nothing of the letter. He had expected that the answer would reveal some connecting link between his wife and either Pauline*Spencer or Piero Balbi, and now that it had arrived it was apparently from a total stranger.

He searched the directory and found that Mrs Samson was there recorded as occupying "The Hawthorns." So it might after all be a genuine letter. For some time he sat silently thinking, and at length said,—

"Reichardt, you must go. I confess it is a puzzle to me, and you must find the key to it. I don't see that any harm can come of it, and we shall put them on the wrong scent. They'll want to know where you drove the woman, and what are you going to tell them?"

"Well, I know of a house in Albert Street, Camden Town, that only became vacant last week. I thought I would tell them it was there I drove the party."

"As good as anywhere else. Yes, tell them that, and mind above all things be careful not to let out too much about yourself, John Drew, while you find out everything you can about the advertiser and the extent of her knowledge. You're a German, of good character, remember, and that's why the police give you a licence."

"Yes, am I to go this evening?"

"Go this evening. If everything turns out right slip this card into a pillar-box, and I shall know first thing in the morning. I can't help you in the least. I am quite in the dark myself, so you must trust to your own wits."

"Oh, I shall manage all right. You'll get the postcard safe enough."

While this conversation was taking place in the Albany another was in progress in Pauline's own room in Mount Street. At it were present Pauline, Dora Colvin and Gerald Mildmay.

"It is very good of your aunt to help me in this way, Gerald. It is not everyone who would have done it. But if I had appeared in any way in the matter the chances are that I should have discovered nothing, as you know."

"Oh, Aunt Mary is a rare good sort, and, while she is delighted to help you, she rather enjoys this little plot of yours. It gives her something to think about. There's a mystery connected with it and she revels in mystery—Maskelyne and Cook's show is more to her than the best concert going," said Mildmay.

"Yes, Pauline, I went with Gerald when he broached the subject to Mrs Samson, and I can assure you she was delighted, and at once said we were all to dine with her for the occasion. If the man does not turn up this evening we are to go again to-morrow."

"Oh no, I cannot trespass on her kindness in this way."

"I can assure you she will be horribly offended if you don't," said Gerald. "She has planned everything. Dinner is to be in the study, as there are only three of us, and then she can interview him in the dining-room—a double room with curtains between—and she has arranged so that we shall be able to see and hear all that takes place."

"Capital! Nothing could be better."

"We're to dine at six, so be ready, and Gerald and I will call for you in the carriage about a quarter to."

"I'll be ready. I've some schemes too, but I need not trouble you with them now. We can talk them over finally when we get there."

"Oh, yes, and now we must be off. Don't trouble to ring; we can let ourselves out. Ta-ta till this evening."

When the friends had gone, Pauline still remained where they had left her. Her little plot, for it was her own entirely, looked like working out properly.

After her visit to Vipan's faithful friend, and hearing from the head nurse of his ward that it would still be some little time before he would be about again, the idea came into her mind that, in the meantime, she might be able to help him and relieve his anxiety by discovering the whereabouts of the woman he loved so devotedly. She spoke of the matter to her bosom friend, Dora, who naturally suggested calling in the aid of her *fiancé*, and when it came to the fixing of some place for the interview with the cabman, and to which he might answer without giving rise to any suspicion, Gerald hit upon his aunt, Mrs Samson, a good-natured widow, to whom, as he said, any mystery was a *bonne-bouche*. The lady fell in with her nephew's request and entered into the matter with evident interest and so the arrangements already detailed came about.

Pauline had been very careful not to disclose any more than was absolutely necessary. She was apparently only anxious about the fate of the woman who was a compatriot of the friend of the man to whom she had been engaged. Not even Dora knew of Guelfo's connection with her, for Gerald had preserved his secret as Pauline had asked him. The girl looked for great things as the result of the coming interview. At present she

had only suspicions and deductions to work upon, but if she could obtain the aid of an outsider, uncontaminated, as it were, then she would have a trustworthy foundation on which to work.

Pauline was standing in the hall with her opera wrap on, waiting for her friend, when Lord Oxendale emerged from the study.

"Oh, Pauline, I forgot you are not going to dine at home this evening."

"No, father, I'm due at Mrs Samson's. Dora and Gerald are coming to call for me."

"Shall the carriage be sent for you later on?"

"No, don't trouble. I don't quite know what time we shall break up, and I can easily get a cab."

"Well, my dear, I hope you'll have a pleasant evening and enjoy yourself. Give our kind regards to Mrs Samson. Bye-the-bye, Pauline, I almost forgot to tell you. You remember my mentioning those Peruvian mine shares the other day?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, I had an extraordinarily kind letter from that man Guelfo, offering to take any I may wish to get rid of and saying that, as he advised me to invest, he will give me the same price I paid for them. I can't understand it. There isn't another man in the City who would have acted so. He's a real good fellow."

Pauline did not acquiesce in the statement. The glimmer of a smile played about her lips and eyes as she said,—

"I congratulate you, father. You're well out of them, I'm sure, and if you'll take my advice you'll

avoid Mr Guelfo's pet schemes as you would the plague."

"My dear, you're not very charitable. Guelfo has done me a good turn and I ought to stick to him, especially as there are rumours going about that he has not been quite so successful lately. I am afraid he may have trouble with some of his schemes."

"Then don't mix yourself up in them. Take my advice and—ah! here's the carriage." And kissing her father affectionately Pauline hurried to the door, and the next moment was whirled away with her two friends."

"She's an extraordinary girl!" said the Viscount to himself, as he mounted the stairs. "I really believe that if Providence had made a boy of her instead of a girl she would have had a better head for the City than her old father!"

CHAPTER XX

REVEALS A CLEVER RUSE

DINNER was over at "The Hawthorns" and the expectant quartette were seated round the table with their coffee before them while Gerald was enjoying a cigarette.

"It's past seven," Mrs Samson was saying, "and we may expect the man any time. I'm quite excited at the prospect. I have thought better of the plan I first arranged and have had the curtains looped back between the two dining-rooms so that the inner room is quite open. It looks so much more honest and unsuspicious, doesn't it? But, dear," turning to Pauline, "I've had a screen placed quite naturally in front of the door of that room, and you and Gerald will be able to conceal yourselves there while Dora and I interview the man. Dora is such a child to look at; he will not object to talking before her."

"Aunt Mary, what an awful libel!" protested the young lady, who already called Mrs Samson "aunt" in view of her approaching marriage.

"He little knows the depth of her deception," said Gerald, smiling at his well-beloved.

"If you two don't stop I'll give the whole show away and put this person Drew up to the character

of the people he is dealing with. There's the bell!" exclaimed Dora.

"Yes, it is. Now, Pauline, you and Gerald be off and take your places before William gets to the front door. I think we all know our parts now. Dora and I will follow him into the dining-room almost immediately. He sha'n't have any time to go ferreting about."

Pauline and Gerald hurried down the stairs and were in the inner room, with their eyes glued to the holes which Mrs Samson had made in the design of the screen commanding a view of the whole of the front room, when William ushered in Reichardt. With the addition of a dark, shaggy wig he presented a very fair representation of a typical growler-driver minus his badge. They saw him glance suspiciously around the room, and he had already risen from his chair as though to make a closer inspection, when the sounds of approaching footsteps caused him quickly to resume his seat.

"Good-evening, Mr Drew," said Mrs Samson pleasantly, as she entered the room, and Dora echoed the greeting as she followed. "Pray, be seated," as Reichardt bowed. "It is very good of you to have so kindly called on me in answer to my advertisement. I hope I have not inconvenienced you."

"In no manner of means, mum. I've done work for the day," he said, at once betraying his accent.

"Quite so. Now, as you no doubt gathered from my advertisement, I am very anxious to ascertain the present whereabouts of the poor woman who

was injured in that terrible fire. She has not communicated with her friends since, and they fear that her mind was perhaps affected by what she went through and that something unfortunate may have happened to her."

"Well, ma'am, I don't know that I can tell you very much. I certainly did drive a party who was injured in that fire, and it may be the same party as you want, but of course I can't say for certain."

"Oh, I think there is little doubt of that."

"You were perhaps present?"

"Oh dear no! I heard nothing of it till a day or two afterwards."

"Ah! Well, I was called off the rank in Farringdon Street and drove into Green Street, which was as near as the police would let me go, and then, soon after, two young men brought the person, who was fainting and all limp like, and put her into my cab. Then they gets in themselves and says, 'Royal Free Hospital. Drive like blazes!' and drive I did for all my horse was worth till we got to the Gray's Inn Road. Then one on 'em puts his head out of the window and holloas, 'She's coming round and won't go to the hospital. Drive to Albert Street, Camden Town. She's got friends there.' 'Right you are!' I said; 'I'm glad to hear it, poor thing!' And with that I went on, past King's Cross and Pancras Road till we come to Albert Street. 'What number?' I says. 'Go on till I stop you; I'm not sure,' says the man inside. I drove a bit slower till he shouted again, 'Here! whoa! pull up on the off side.' I did so and out they all got, and while one

on them pays me my fare—and that he give me a bit over I won't deny—the other was a-helping the party, what still seemed a bit shaky and uncertain on her feet, into the garden. 'I hope the lady will be none the worse, and thank you, sir!' I said and drives off, and when I did happen to look back all three of them were on the doorstep ringing the bell; and that's all I know."

"Thank you. Your account is a very clear one, but what was the number of the house?"

"Ah! there I'm done. I can't tell you that. I never heard it, but I *do* know it had one of them stone jugs or vases or things with flowers growing in it in the middle of the garden bed, and up the side of the path to the door there were ferns. I'm particular fond of them kind of things and took a bit of notice."

"Just so; and do you think you'd know the house again."

"Of course I would."

"Was the door opened while you were looking?"

"Now you mention it I remember it was, for I saw the figures of the three of them standing out all black against the light. But I'd got a longish way off then."

"Would you know any of your fares again?"

"Not the lady! You see I didn't get a good look at her. But the young man who spoke to me and paid me I'd know anywhere."

"Now, Mr Drew, you're not very busy this evening I understand?"

"No, madam, I'm not."

"Would you mind going with my nephew and showing him the house? Of course I shall

'recompense you for your loss of time and trouble."

"I'm quite at your service, madam, and to-night would suit me better than most times."

"Thank you. I suppose you have not chanced to hear anything of any of your fares since that evening?"

"Nothing at all."

"No, perhaps it was hardly likely you would."

Pauline and Gerald had been interested witnesses and auditors of this interview, and the very first moment they had caught sight of Reichardt had recognised him as one of the men they had seen standing by the gate of the Botanical Gardens, though beyond this neither had any knowledge of him. They had conveyed this fact to each other by a sign, but no word had been uttered.

"Beg pardon, madam, but could you tell me the lady's name?" continued Reichardt. "I might perhaps have heard it. We drivers on the rank were talking about the fire the other day."

"She was an Italian who used to go about with a piano-organ and was known to her companions and neighbours as Lucia."

"A good many of them does that from Clerkenwell and Saffron Hill. No, I don't remember hearing that name," said Reichardt, in a perfectly natural manner.

"And now, Mr Drew, if you will excuse me a moment I will call my nephew, and no doubt he will go with you to Camden Town, when you can point out the house to him. In the meantime you will perhaps take a little something. 'Dora, my

dear, will you look after Mr Drew?" And leaving the room Mrs Samson went to the foot of the stairs and called loudly, "Gerald! Gerald!"

Leaving Pauline's side, Gerald crept out of the back dining-room and, while Mrs Samson explained to him in a low tone that the cabman had called, they entered the room together. Short as her absence had been, Reichardt had made up his mind as to his course of action, and when Mrs Sampson said, "This is my nephew, Mr Mildmay, who will accompany you, Mr Drew," Reichardt nodded and smiled in an almost familiar manner.

"Good-evening, sir."

"Good-evening," replied Gerald, shortly.

"I don't think there is any use in going to Camden Town now, ma'am."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Mrs Samson, astonished.

"Because this gentleman knows more about the matter than I do."

"What?" exclaimed Gerald, taken off his guard.

"This gentleman was one of the two who assisted the lady and who paid me when they all got out in Albert Street."

"Great Scot! what are you going to say next?" gasped Gerald, utterly dumbfounded by the man's impertinent invention.

"I've nothing more to say," replied Reichardt, quietly.

"Why, I was never near the fire. And as to Albert Street, I haven't a notion where it is. You must be dreaming, man!"

"I don't think so, sir. I'm not often mistaken in a face."

"You mean to say I was in your cab that evening?"

"I do, sir."

"Then all I can say is you never made a bigger mistake in your life."

Reichardt played his part well and managed to convey to his hearers that he only half believed the assertion of Gerald. However, in the end he consented to go to Albert Street with that gentleman, and Mrs Samson having thanked him and given him a couple of sovereigns, he and Gerald left the house together.

The three ladies had just gone up to the drawing-room and were discussing the interview, when William entered.

"A cabman has called, madam, in answer to an advertisement he says, and wishes to see you."

"But he has only just left, William."

"This is another one, madam."

"We must see him at once," said Pauline, decidedly. "There's something wrong here. I'm afraid we've been done. May William show him into the dining-room, Mrs Samson?"

"Certainly! Do so, William."

All three ladies were present on this occasion and listened with great interest to the man's story.

He was perfectly open and honest and told them how he had conveyed the woman and two men to Pratt Street, Camden Town, and how he had been dismissed while the woman appeared to be still in only a semi-conscious condition, adding that he had had such great doubt as

to the *bona fides* of his fares that, while driving away, he had kept his eyes open and had seen one of the men run into College Street and hail another cab, the number of which he knew. He further told how he had been approached by Reichardt with a view to keeping him silent, and concluded by saying,—

“But when I came to think it over, I saw it would not do. It wasn’t playing the game. So, when I had left my cab at the yard this evening, I went to the address in the advertisement and the man sent me straight here. Look here, madam, I’ve got five pounds to keep my mouth shut, and that money’s never given me a moment’s peace since. Here it is! five sovereigns,” taking them out of his pocket, “and if I could only see the ‘chap as gave me them, I’d fling ’em in his face. Blessed if I wouldn’t!”

“If we’re only quick enough I can show him to you!” cried Pauline, impulsively springing up. “Run out and find a cab with a good horse. I’ll get my hat on meantime. Will you come with me, Dora? We might catch Gerald yet.”

In a second everything was bustle and hurry, and in almost less time than it takes to tell the two girls and the cabman were being whirled away round the outer circle of Regent’s Park.

As they went the man gave them further particulars, and also a description of the men by whom he was hired, from which Pauline was almost certain that Guelfo was one of them and John Drew the other, though in the matter of

the colour of his hair the description failed. Arriving at the top of Albert Street the cab stopped. Pauline looked out, but though she could see the whole length of the street, there was no sign of any other vehicle. She directed the driver to go slowly so that she might examine the gardens on one side, while Dora did so on the other. They had proceeded about half way down it when Dora exclaimed,—

“That must be the house! There’s the vase in the middle of the garden, but there’s a bill ‘To Let’ in one of the windows.”

“Probably! He’d most likely choose an empty house for his story. Can you see anything of Gerald?”

No—but—I’m not sure. There are two people walking down the far end of the street. Go on first!”

The driver urged his horse and as the cab came up with them Pauline called out,—

“Gerald!” for it turned out to be him and Drew.

Mildmay looked round in astonishment, and stepping from the pavement approached the cab. His companion also turned his head and catching sight of the two girls seemed to guess something was wrong, for he did not stop but rather hastened his steps.

“Don’t let that man get away!” cried Pauline.

“Which?”

“Drew; the one you were with. He is a fraud.”

Drew heard the words and started to run.

“Stop him, Gerald, stop him! Follow him, cabby!”

And with that commenced a race through the silent, deserted streets. The man had got a fair start and turned the corner of Albert Street into Mornington Street before those following were well on the move. Turning again to the left, he rushed up Arlington Street, and ere the cab or Gerald could reach the end of it he had completely vanished. He might have hidden in some one of the gardens he had passed, or dived down the passage leading into the High Street. At any rate he was gone. And the disappointed searchers, realising it would be a practically hopeless task to endeavour to discover him at that hour gave up the search and, taking Gerald with them, drove on to Pratt Street, where the true cabman pointed out the house before which he had deposited his fares on the night in question. There was nothing to be gained by an inspection of it, and together they all returned to "The Hawthorns."

Before leaving them the cabman, who stated his name was Reginald Baker, promised to do his best to find the driver of No. 10,003, the cab he had seen one of his fares hail, and to bring him to Mrs Samson's.

As they were talking over the matter, preparatory to leaving, Mildmay said,—

"When that fellow started to bolt I suppose you didn't hear anything, did you?"

"No, what do you mean?"

"I did, and as I followed him something jingled on the pavement. It caught the light, and I stopped and picked it up."

"I saw you," said Pauline.

“There it is! A rum kind of thing, isn’t it?” said Mildmay, holding out a stamped piece of white metal in the form of a pentagon.

“Let me have it, Gerald. Our evening’s work has not been thrown away after all. Signor Balbi can make this of use where we cannot. I only wish he could have been with us this evening. And I feel now more sure than ever that Wallace’s death will not go unavenged.

CHAPTER XXI

IN DEADLY PERIL

PIERO BALBI was himself again. Yet, could his innermost soul have been laid bare to the world, a great change would have been observed and no one could have asserted with truth that he *was* himself. His kindly, genial, simple nature had hardened and withered. He had become stern, inflexible—many would have said cruel. When he had come to England he had had but one object outside his business affairs—the avenging of the death of his friend, Wallace Vipan. Now, since the fire and hearing all Pauline had told him of what had taken place during his illness, he had found two more burdens laid upon him—the rescue and recovery of his early love, Lucia, and the bringing home to punishment of her abductor. Anger and bitterness mingled within the heart of Balbi.

He cared nothing for amusement and pleasure now. His every thought was given to the accomplishment of the objects he had in view. To Pauline and those who had given her their aid during his enforced absence in the hospital he was the gentle, quiet Balbi of old ; to the rest of the world he was a stern, morose and dangerous man.

From Pauline he had heard the result of the

advertisement and how, some days after the visit to Albert and Pratt Streets, Camden Town, the cabman, Baker, had called on Mrs Samson, bringing with him the driver of 10,003. It so happened that Gerald Mildmay was at the house at the time, and to him and Mrs Samson the driver of 10,003 told his story, with the outline of which the reader is already acquainted. The house to which he had driven the two men was No. 10 Vivian Square, Old Ford, and the woman, when taken from the cab there, appeared to be in the same semi-conscious condition as she was when Baker had seen the last of her.

This much information Balbi found available when he came out of the hospital, and his first proceeding was to make several journeys down to Old Ford and the neighbourhood of Vivian Square, and endeavour to ascertain the character of the occupants of No. 10.

He called at many of the small shops and put questions in a casual way, but he noticed a very marked reluctance on the part of nearly everyone to whom he applied to say much. The locality appeared saturated with suspicion. Balbi was a stranger and a foreigner, and the purpose of his inquiries was unknown; therefore it was best to be on the safe side with him and say nothing.

He applied to policemen whom he met upon their beats and obtained little satisfaction from any of them. They knew the occupier, James Woolpert, by name, but he hadn't been there very long, and what his occupation was they couldn't exactly say. They didn't think he did very much and, though there was nothing definite known

against him, they were keeping their eyes upon him. His wife and himself lived there alone and they had no children.

Balbi passed and repassed the house continually, but he could never manage to catch a glimpse of the proprietor. At length he determined to hesitate no longer, but force an issue. Arming himself with a revolver he waited till evening and then made his way straight to the door and knocked loudly. He waited some time without there being any response. Again he knocked, and this time he heard shuffling footsteps descending the stairs. The door was cautiously opened, and as it swung back he placed his right foot within the threshold so that the door could not be closed again.

A middle-aged women inquired 'his business in surly tones.

"Is Mr Woolpert in?"

"No, he ain't."

"When do you expect him back?"

"Maybe to-morrow; maybe not till next week," she answered, with a true Cockney accent.

"Thanks, then I'll come in and wait," And as an attempt was made to close the door, Balbi thrust his whole body forward and defeated her object. He had been quite prepared for the answer he had received and judged that the man he was in search of was at that moment on the premises.

"Look 'ere! what do you mean by it?" exclaimed the baffled woman. "You've no right in 'ere if I don't want you. I'll call the perlice and 'ave you kicked out."

"Better not, my good woman! Better not!" replied Balbi, quietly. "The police have not made your acquaintance as yet. I'll wait in your parlour, if you've no objection," and opening a door on the left in the narrow passage, he found himself in a small room, furnished probably on the hire system and littered with different articles of wearing apparel.

The woman had followed him closely.

"Now, I ain't going to stand none of your bloomin' cheek, mister!" she said. "I don't know who you are, an' what's more I don't want to know. But you're not going to stay here, so take your hook before you're turned out."

Balbi had seated himself in an American cloth covered armchair beside the grate which was littered with ashes and match-ends.

"My good woman," he said, "it's not the slightest use your troubling yourself. Here I am and here I remain until I see your husband—Mr Woolpert."

"I'll have you turned out!"

"No, you won't!" And then very quietly, "Yor dare not!" He did not fail to notice the almost imperceptible start the woman gave. "You'll go and tell your husband someone is waiting to see him."

"He's away from home."

"Then, as I said before, I'll wait."

The woman was puzzled and stood by the door irresolutely.

"Who are you?" she said at last.

"You wouldn't be any the wiser if I told you," he replied. "Go and fetch your husband."

"You ain't a 'tec', are you? You don't look like one."

"No, I'm not a 'tec'."

Again there was a silence and the woman still kept her station, watching her mysterious visitor, who seemed quite content to await her convenience.

"Look 'ere," she said at last, "tell me what you are and what you want, and then if you're on the square I might be able to send for Woolpert."

"Don't trouble yourself to do that. I'll wait till he returns. I'm in no hurry."

"Well, you *are* a licker and I can't make you out!" exclaimed the woman at last, and flounced out of the room.

As soon as she had disappeared Balbi heaved a big sigh. The strain for the moment was over and he could relax. He glanced round the room and a small coloured print of some foreign market-place caught his eye, and he rose from his chair to examine it.

"Now, where is that?" he muttered to himself. "I've been there, I know. I remember that church and that house." He stopped suddenly. The muffled sound of voices caught his ear. He smiled to himself and resumed his seat.

The woman re-entered the room.

"Is your name Hicks?" she asked.

"No, it isn't, and I haven't the honour of knowing anyone of that name."

"Have you it in your pocket?"

Balbi in turn was startled and puzzled. What did she mean? He had nothing to guide him in guessing, but it would not do to display ignorance.

"Of course I have," he said promptly.

“Show it to me.”

“No, thank you; I don't know you—at least not sufficiently well to risk that.”

“You're careful.”

“I have to be.”

While she stood before him, the woman was tracing a figure on the tablecloth with her finger, apparently a mere careless action. But without seeming to notice Balbi's eye was watching her every movement and in a second he had grasped her intent.

It was the form of a pentagon which her finger traced.

He allowed his hand to rest on the table near him and, as soon as she had done, repeated her action.

She saw it and smiled.

“It's all right. You're straight, and he'll come down and see you.” And again she left the room.

“That's a piece of pure, unadulterated luck; nothing else!” Balbi muttered to himself in Italian. “But I shall have to be doubly careful now. They're a dangerous lot here.”

In a few minutes he heard heavier footfalls descending the stairs. He felt in his hip pocket that his revolver was handy and bracing himself up he waited.

The door opened and a man entered. Balbi was on his feet, his eyes fixed on the newcomer's face. The man stared at him with equal directness. Thus they stood silently for some moments. Gradually a gleam of recognition appeared on the faces of both, though that on the countenance of the

last-comer was mingled with a look of apprehension and dismay.

Balbi marked it and at the same time his eye fell on the coloured print on the wall behind. The past came back to him in a flash.

"You didn't expect to see me here, did you?"

"No, I didn't," replied the man, with a horrible oath.

"Thought I was still out Cuzco?"

"Maybe."

"You didn't call yourself Woolpert out there?"

"That's my business, not yours."

"Well, man, you needn't be huffy over it."

"I shall be what I like. This is my own house and you've come in without an invitation. What's your game? Quick; I don't want any jaw over it."

"Easy! easy!" continued Balbi, in a conciliatory tone, but all the time watching the man's face with the keenest scrutiny. "Given up running?"

"Yes, if you must know."

"And haven't had anything to do with them since you left Mollendo?"

The colour of the man's face went a shade paler, and there was a twitching of the muscles about his mouth, but he recovered himself quickly.

"Here, drop it!" he said. "Who are you that you should try to put me through my paces. You've come to the wrong shop for that. We may have been pals in that cursed country, but it strikes me we sha'n't cotton together here, so, once for all, what do you want?"

Balbi took a step forward and the expression on his face suddenly became terrible in the intensity of its determination.

‘ “I want to know what you’ve done with her; and if you value your life at a single *soldo* you’ll tell me.”

The man stepped backwards and his hand went suddenly towards the breast of his coat. But Balbi was too quick for him.

“Hands up!” he cried, as he covered the other with his revolver.

The man turned as pale as death, but obeyed.

“Now, tell me what you’ve done with her and tell me quick. I’m in no mood for trifling. You hear?”

“Done with who? What’s the use of gassing about with that shooting-iron? This isn’t South America and I’m not a Spaniard or an Italian. Tell me plainly what you want to know and let’s deal reasonably and not like a couple of drunken *gauchos*,” said the man, endeavouring to assume a more careless manner.

“Keep your hands up!” replied Balbi, and holding the muzzle of the revolver with an inch of the other’s head, the Italian took from the man’s pocket a long pointed knife. “Now, perhaps, we can do what you suggest,” he said. “Go and sit down over there,” pointing to a chair by the fireplace.

The man did so. “This is queer treatment by a pal,” he grumbled.

“Don’t call me by that name. I never sank so low as to be the pal of a thief and a—well, worse. Where have you hidden her?”

“Hidden who?”

“You know. The Italian woman who was brought here on the night of the thirteenth.”

"There was no one brought here. The missus and I were away down at Ramsgate. The house was shut up."

"That's a lie! Look here, Woolpert, if you choose to call yourself by that name, you ought to know me by this time, and that I'm not to be gammoned by any of your tricks. You never got round me out in Peru, though Heaven knows you tried hard enough, and it isn't likely you'll come the game over me now. I'm going to have the truth out of you; it's that or your life. You take your choice."

His words had a decided effect on the man.

"Put down that cursed pistol. I can't talk with it staring me in the face," he gasped, trembling all over in sheer terror.

"There's no need to talk. Just tell me where you've hidden her."

"I don't know and that's the truth."

"Then she was here?"

"There was someone here, if you must know, but where she came from, who she was or where she went to I know no more than an unborn baby."

"You're lying again! Who brought her here? Quick! I swear to you I'll shoot if I don't have your answer."

The man hesitated.

"Quick!" repeated Balbi.

"It's not the game!" the other gasped. "You're one of us. You shouldn't round on me like this."

"Quick!" Suddenly Balbi saw the expression on the man's face alter and a new light came in his eyes. He had caught sight of something. In

an instant it flashed across the Italian that he was standing in a dangerous place. His back was towards the door. For a moment he relaxed his gaze and turned his head. That moment was fatal. Woolpert sprang at him like a tiger, and though Balbi discharged his pistol the shot was harmless. Woolpert was upon him and bearing him backwards. His feet were caught by the rug which was rumbled up. He was falling and with his left hand he made a grab at the mantel-shelf for support. His fingers closed on a common china ornament, a little ash-tray, which came away with them, and as a cloth was flung over his face from behind and the fumes of chloroform were in his nostrils, he fell.

Desperately he fought and struggled, and as he managed to tear the cloth from before his eyes he caught a momentary glimpse of two faces bending over him; one was that of Woolpert; the other he had never seen before, but with his failing senses he photographed it on his brain so distinctly, so indelibly, that to the day of his death he would ever be able to recall every feature, every wrinkle, every line. Then with a strange pain in his left arm, which in falling was doubled beneath him, all became dark.

He had failed at the supreme moment, and the strong, determined man lay helpless as a child in the hands of his captors.

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT THE CAMERA REVEALED

DIM reflections slowly crept into Balbi's reawakening brain. He raised his heavy eyelids and glanced round him. It was daylight. But where was he? Around him lay spades, forks, a wheelbarrow, bundles of stakes, baskets and many empty flower-pots. He was lying on the ground and his left arm pained him. He closed his eyes again and tried to think, but his brain refused to act clearly. Everything seemed in a jumble; nothing was distinct.

He listened. Occasionally he heard the voices of children laughing and shouting, and a hawker calling his wares. He looked about him again. He was in the tool-house of some garden. Close behind his head was a mowing-machine. His arm gave him a sudden pain, his hand was clenched. He opened it with difficulty and something fell with a tinkle on the asphalt floor. With a great effort he sat up. He was aching in every limb, and as he bent his head it did not seem as if it were his own. His eyes caught the glitter of something bright; he picked it up.

It was a silver sleeve-link.

Then it all came back to him, slowly at first, but with ever-increasing conviction. He recollected

the struggle and how in falling he had made a grab at the mantelshelf and had seized something that had afforded him no support. Then the strange fumes stealing his senses as the cloth was pulled over his head, his last frantic endeavour to free himself and the faces of the two men bending over him. He would never forget them; they had eaten into his recollection.

He struggled to his feet by a great effort and found himself weak and shaken. His legs trembled under him and he swayed about like a drunken man, but his mind was more under control. Holding on by a rough bench he gazed out of the cobweb-festooned window, and recognised that he was in the garden-shed in the middle of Vivian Square. As he moved the rustle of paper caught his ear and a gleam of white, sticking out of the breast of his coat, attracted his eye. He drew the paper out. It was a dirty sheet, note size, on which was writing. He tried to read the words, but they swam before his eyes into blurred lines. Again and again he tried, but in vain. He crumpled it up and thrust it into his pocket.

Then he tottered to the door; it was not locked and he pulled it open. The fresh morning air revived him. He drank it in in deep draughts. It was like nectar to him, giving him fresh life. He was stronger already; he had more command over his limbs. He could walk now, slowly and with uncertain steps, but still he could walk.

There was no one in the garden; he had the place to himself. He picked up a garden stick from the bundle in the corner, and with its aid he made his way along the path, searching for the

gate of the enclosure. Twice he stopped and rested on a seat, and on the second occasion he found himself almost in front of No. 10, where the events of the previous evening had taken place.

The blinds of all the windows were drawn and a milk-can stood on the step, a cat was mewing for admittance at the sill of the parlour-window and the place now looked deserted. Balbi by this time felt sufficient confidence in his power to trust himself in the streets. He found the gate, it was unlocked, and as a neighbouring clock struck nine he turned into Roman Road. Slowly he worked his way westward, through Bethnal Green, until at Shoreditch Church he was able to get a seat in a 'bus which landed him at the Bank.

Here all was bustle and hurry. • Clerks, typists and City men were passing and repassing in their thousands to their daily tasks. The crowding and pushing confused Balbi's brain, at present only partially recovered. He endeavoured to cross the road to the Mansion House, when he saw a motor car coming quickly upon him. He hesitated whether to go back or forward, his foot slipped and he fell. In another second he would have been under the wheels had not a strong hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him into safety.

"Why, bless me, if it isn't Balbi! Whoever would have thought of seeing *you* here?" and looking up Balbi saw that his rescuer was the man he had parted with at Mollendo months before — Henry Ellis. •

"Signor Ellis!" he exclaimed. "How can I thank you? It was a near go. I don't know

'what came over me, but I am not quite myself this morning. I—I—'

"Say no more; you certainly don't look the thing. Come with me to my office and rest a little; it's close at hand." And without further parley Ellis took the little Italian's arm and led him to Coleman Street. Here he got out some brandy and made Balbi lie down on the sofa in his own private room, doing all in his power to make the Italian comfortable. At first he left him to himself a good deal, thinking the quiet was best for him, but after a time he came and entered into conversation about their former meeting, in the course of which he said,—

"Do you know, Balbi, I wish I had never gone to Cuzco. I have regretted it ever since."

"Ah! and why, Signor Ellis?"

"Well, my opinions—my views have altered since then, and if I had my time over again, and the same proposition was made to me that was then made, I would not accept it. I can't—I mustn't say more. But you perhaps will understand."

"I do understand and I am pleased to hear what you say. But if it will relieve your mind I may tell you that the man Guelfo's sharpness—as no doubt he considers it—will hurt no one but himself and those who put their trust in him."

"Is that so?"

"It is; I took care of that. You have done me a great service to-day, signore, and I am grateful as a man can be, and if you are open to what you in England term a 'tip,' I say have nothing to do with the 'Queen of the Cordilleras.' If you hold

shares, cut your loss and get rid of them. But go strong for the —; there's money in it, I know. I shall take care Guelfo has nothing to do with that; it will succeed on its own merits."

"Guelfo's a great power in the City; remember that! Did you notice that it was he who nearly ran you down this morning? He might have pulled up sooner than he did, I think."

"Signor Ellis, Guelfo would have rejoiced to see me smashed, if it could have been done without any blame attaching to him."

"Oh, no, not really. You are hard on him. I don't suppose he had anything against you. You had something to sell, he bought it, and there the matter ended."

"To the outside world, yes. However, let it pass. It is only between ourselves. And now I must not trespass on your kindness any longer; I'm feeling nearly all right again and I'll get back to my hotel. After a good rest there will not be much amiss with me, I hope. I sha'n't forget what you have done for me." And Balbi left Coleman Street with a far better opinion of Ellis than he had held previously.

On arriving at his hotel, Balbi took out the paper which he had found thrust into his coat, the writing on which he had not been able to read when he had first discovered it. It was now quite plain.

"As you are one of us, we give you your life this time, but be warned. Interfere with any of us again and the penalty is Death."

"Death! That for the brotherhood, then," and the Italian snapped his fingers and laughed. "You villains, you got to windward of me once, but it is for the last time. I have the rope safe round the neck of one of you already, and if I don't draw it tight immediately, it's only because I mean to learn what I want from you first. Lucia must be rescued, and then the penalty shall be death, as you say, but it is you that shall pay it." And he took from his pocket and laid on the table the silver sleeve-link he had found in his hand and going to his old, battered, tin despatch-box he unlocked it and took therefrom the broken link Pauline had handed to him, and compared them.

After some time he laid them aside and took up the sheet of paper again. He was turning it over carelessly when he started and hurried to the window to examine it by the better light.

It was half a sheet of letter-paper, of very inferior, spongy quality such as can, with envelopes, be purchased at a huckster's shop for a penny. One edge was frayed and rough, showing it had been torn from a full sheet. What had at first caught Balbi's notice was the faint indented impression of a portion of a circle with the letters "ILLIN" plainly visible within. It was the cancelling stamp of the office at which the letter had been posted. The stamp had been used with force, but the face of it not being flush with the envelope only the letters in a segment of the circle had been impressed.

While examining this mark, Balbi observed other indentations. There were lines of them all down the blank side of the paper. At first he was

puzzled, but after scrutinising them carefully for a time he came to the conclusion the paper had formed the second sheet of a piece of notepaper, on the first sheet of which a letter had been written in pencil, the paper resting on some soft pad, so that the lines of writing had been deeply impressed, and the impression had been retained by the under sheet as well.

In an ordinary matter this would not have interested him at all, but, knowing where the paper came from, he eagerly seized on every chance, however slight, of gaining the information he sought. He was the more eager, because he fancied he could trace the word "Italian" among the marks, and if he were correct, there was no knowing what secret might not be hidden in that apparently white sheet.

Balbi pondered over it a long time and then it struck him that his friend Taft might be able to help him in the matter. He knew he employed photography in his occupation, and so would be able at any rate to tell him if that were likely to bring to light what was hidden from the unaided, human eye.

That evening Taft received a visit from Balbi, who laid the whole matter before him, in the meantime having kept the paper very carefully guarded from any further pressure.

"I don't know, I'm sure, Balbi," said the old man. "It might be of use; we can but try. The camera often reveals writing and ink marks which have been obliterated. Leave the paper with me. I have a man who does a lot of camera work and who is a first-class photographer. If anything is

to be brought to light he will be able to do it and keep his mouth shut at the same time. I'll see him to-morrow and hear what he thinks of the affair; and if anything comes of it I will drop you a line. It won't matter his seeing the writing on the other side; he won't understand it, and if he did, it would be nothing to him."

The two friends sat long into the night smoking and talking, and Balbi heard that Taft had not been further disturbed, but also that he had discovered nothing more in reference to the attempt which had been made upon his safe.

As Balbi rose to leave, Taft said,—

"By-the-bye, I've had the prospectus of another mine out in Peru. The —— they call it. Wasn't that the one you mentioned to me?"

"That was the one, my friend," replied Balbi. "Get all the shares you possibly can. It's good. I have put all I possess into it. If you do what I say it will make you a rich man."

"But I don't see Guelfo's name with it?" said Taft.

"It is not. It is strong enough to run without his aid. Take my advice and you will not regret it. I explored it myself, and I have not spent all those years below ground without knowing what is good and what is bad. It's an old mine which was abandoned by the original workers when it was in full working order—probably when those devils of Spaniards came down upon them. They concealed the entrance, and it was only by mere chance that I came upon it and purchased the land before anyone got wind of it. I had everything cut and dried; papers signed, concessions granted,

transfers made, before I left South America. Everything is in order, and if it does not turn up trumps never believe in me again."

It was three or four days later when he received a note from Taft saying,—

"Come over this evening. I have something which will interest you."

In the meantime Balbi had paid Pauline another visit and told her of his adventure in Vivian Square. He had, further, been down there again and had ascertained that No. 10 was closed and the tenants away.

The little man was early at the appointment, and as he greeted his friend said,—

"Well, what is it? Does it tell me anything?"

"Come and see," replied Taft, leading the way to his room where, beneath the lamp, lay a photograph of the paper.

Balbi seized it eagerly and, holding it near the light, exclaimed as he examined it,—

"This is grand! Lucia, Lucia, you shall be saved. I will find you now and nevermore shall we be parted." Then, dropping the paper, he hurried round the table and seizing both of Taft's hands in his, wrung them with all the fervour of his Southern nature as he agitatedly exclaimed with tears in his eyes, "Thank you, thank you a thousand times, my friend. You have given life to us again. Lucia thanks you as well as me."

"That's all right, my dear fellow. It's little I've done, but do you think it will help you?"

"Of-course it will; I have something to work on now. I have found that Lucia was taken to

Vivian Square and that, at a later date, she was somewhere near a postal town the name of which ends with the letters 'ILLIN.' I can discover what this town is, and then every yard of land shall be searched for miles all round. Yes, I will find her. The camera is a wonderful machine." And picking up the paper again he read : —

"15th.

"Arrived all r . . . Lucia bet . . . still . . . muddled . . . mind daz . . . where she is otten ev . . . thing. She . . . trouble seems half asleep . . . told . . . poor woman . . . balmy . . . kind to . . . his letter. See him. They will keep . . . inquiries . . . boat . . . Leith."

"One thing is plain," cried Taft; "that letter comes from Scotland, and that will help you to the post town."

"Ah, that is so! I shall find it, I shall find it. No, my friend, no whisky to-night. I go at once and begin my work. You will not mind. You are kind and know what this means to me. I shall let you hear how I get on. My poor Lucia! you shall soon be free." And placing the curious picture in his pocket the excited Italian, with another fervent shake of the hand, hurried out.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MONEY WORLD

THE room at the Cannon Street Hotel was crowded.

It was the general meeting of the Upper Belgravian Estate Company, one of Guelfo's pet schemes. But matters had not been going well with it of late, and there were rumours flying about the City concerning it. Anyone conversant with public meetings would have been able to say there was an antagonistic spirit abroad—that indescribable something which seems to pervade the atmosphere on some occasions and which, like the gas in the mine, only requires a flame, be it of anger or irritation, to make it most distinctly and unpleasantly apparent.

The chairman had opened the proceedings in a somewhat lengthy and rosy speech, in which he had endeavoured to ignore or gloss over the awkward facts. It had a superficial air of candour but, during its continuance, heads were seen to bend together in different parts of the room, and now and then one or two would shake ominously at some statement. He had to announce a heavy drop in the dividend, but this was put down to unfortunate falls in some of the workings and other causes which were quite unexpected,

and after making the best fight possible he moved the adoption of the report.

The moment he sat down no fewer than a dozen inquisitive shareholders were on their feet, anxious to speak, and it was some time before order could be obtained. Then the antagonistic spirit had full play. Speaker followed speaker, all in the same strain; fault-finding and abuse were rampant; the management was assailed in no gentle manner, till the chairman, heckled and badgered almost beyond endurance, passed a note to Guelfo, who was on the platform, imploring him to say something.

The great financial king of the City could always command attention at any meeting at which he was present; his words were hung on by many who regarded him almost as a god. He had learnt the secret of making money, and if he favoured a project, surely it must be well.

Guelfo read the scrap of paper and smiled, and on the first opportunity he rose to his feet. There was instantly a dead silence and then, before he had time to open his mouth, some shareholder, more courageous than his fellows, gave vent to a prolonged "Oh!"

"Silence, gentlemen, if you please!" cried the chairman. "Go on, Mr Guelfo."

And for a time Mr Guelfo did go on. It was a great effort on his part. He spoke in his pleasant English as, perhaps, he had never spoken before. He employed all the art he was master of, driving home favourable facts, slurring over those he could not combat, promising better times, better dividends and a golden prosperity in the near

future. When he sat down it was amid rounds of applause from those on whom his cleverness had made an impression, but there were hard-headed men present who were not to be carried away by mere words and "gas," and it was their turn now.

Twenty, thirty, sprang to their feet, and Guelfo was pelted with question upon question calculated, if truthfully answered, to lay bare the very bones of the company. Guelfo was on his mettle; he fenced, parried and, when opportunity offered, thrust.

He did all he could, but it did not satisfy the majority, and in the end, after some two hours had been spent in talk and glamour, the meeting was adjourned to allow of the appointment of a committee of inspection to inquire into the working of the company. Guelfo fought his hardest against this; it was the last thing he desired. Committees of inspection are dangerous things when books are not quite in order. Public meetings may be gulled and coaxed into believing many things, but in the calm and quiet of an office facts and figures assume their true proportions and cannot so easily be juggled with.

As a rule Guelfo did not mind public meetings. He could hold his own at them. But this had been a particularly trying one, and now hanging over him was this meddling committee. No wonder he looked worried and ill at ease, and those who addressed him were met with curt, morose replies in place of the usual jocose, if somewhat vulgar, chaff. It was some time before he could get clear of the premises; everyone wanted to have a word with him, to ask his advice or even to be

seen speaking to him, for such was his standing in the world of stocks and shares that there were some who imagined that they gained a kind of reflected glory from merely being acquainted with him.

Coming up St Swithin's Lane he was crossing into Cornhill when he saw Roland Kenrick in front of him. Increasing his pace he came up with him and touching his arm said,—

"Kenrick, I want a word or two with you."

"Certainly, what is it?"

"Let us go into the Exchange; it's quieter there and we can hear ourselves speak."

"By all means; come along! I suppose you have been at the Belgravian meeting? How did it go off?"

"Infernally badly. There was a lot of awkward questions asked, and they've got to be answered somehow. They've appointed a committee to overhaul the whole thing, and I can tell you, Kenrick, it'll turn out devilish awkward for me if I can't square matters to some extent. But never mind that; we men in the City often find ourselves in tight corners and yet get out of them. This is not the first time I've been in a box. I'm only thankful that Nature makes more than half humanity fools. The City wouldn't thrive without that exceedingly useful provision, would it, eh? But I see you're bringing out a new mine in Peru."

"Yes, I am."

"Well, what am I going to have out of it?"

"I don't understand you."

"Nonsense, old fellow, I shall expect my whack, of course."

"What for?"

"What you like! I can make it go for you."

"It doesn't need your help. It's good enough to go by itself," said Kenrick, quietly.

"Glad to hear it; that's something new in the way of mines. But all the same I shall look for my bit."

"Then I'm afraid you'll look in vain, Guelfo!" And Kenrick's face grew dark with anger.

"You mean you're not going to part?"

"I do. Not a stiver."

Guelfo stood stock-still, dumb with astonishment. He had met a man who defied him. This was a new experience with him. Hitherto promoters of companies had been ready to fawn on and curry favour with him, eager to win his smile on their ventures. Never before had he been refused a sop.

"Think, man, think what you're saying!"

"There's no need. I'm not going to give away the shareholders' money. It's not mine to play with. For honest work I'm willing to pay and pay liberally, but in secret commission, hush money, palm grease or whatever you like to call it, not one penny of the capital of the mine shall be spent as long as I have a say in the matter."

"Then I'll ruin you. I've only to breathe a word and the financial papers will go for you tooth and nail."

"Let them go. We're meaning to play the game. The thing's good enough to stand by itself."

"You're a born fool, an idiot—you must be!

'You've been long enough in the City, I should think, to know what I can do.'

"I've been long enough to know what you can't do, and that is injure us."

"I tell you I'll ruin you."

"Try it on. But between you and me, Guelfo, if you take my advice, you'll look to your own affairs and not go cadging about for what you fancy you can frighten some men out of. From what I happen to know you'll find yourself in Queer Street very shortly if you don't look out."

Guelfo laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound, and his face had grown several shades paler.

"Then you mean to have nothing to do with me? You won't let me be in this swim?"

"No, I won't, and that is my final word. I'm going to run this show as I've run every one with which I've had anything to do—on the square. It will stand on its own merits and, as far as I am concerned, the public shall see that there is at least some honesty in the City. And now you have my answer." And Kenrick turned away, but Guelfo followed him, his face working with impotent rage.

"Then you sha'n't live a couple of months!" he almost shouted. "I'll write you down. I'll crab you at every turn. I'll—I'll screw you up. You shall see. I'll let you know what it is to try and bilk me. I'll show you what I can do."

The loud tones in which he spoke had attracted the attention of the few people who were in the Exchange at the time, examining the frescoes on the walls, and they turned their heads to see what was going on.

Kenrick continued to walk away and, passing one of the uniformed porters, said to him, "You might get Mr Guelfo a glass of water. He seems terribly excited about something."

Guelfo heard him and became more angry still, but Kenrick took no further notice of him and left the building.

It was an evil day for the financier—a very trying day. Things had gone wrong from the first and had worked him up to that irritable condition when a man longs to quarrel with someone as an excuse for working off his bad temper. The porter was not a discerning individual and, taking Kenrick at his word, went up to Guelfo and inquired if he should procure him a drink.

All the answer he received was an oath and a command not to make a fool of himself, and the next minute Guelfo was elbowing his way in the street towards his office. Many a head was turned as he passed to look after him, and many a remark was made regarding the proceedings at the Belgravian meeting and the effect they seemed to have exercised on the man who was the head and front of the affair.

"I wouldn't be in old Guelfo's office to-day for anything," remarked a callow youth with the authorised clerk's badge in his buttonhole, whose hair was mathematically divided, plastered down and glossy with grease. "There'll be ructions there, you bet!"

His companion looked round at the retreating figure. "He'll give somebody beans from the look of him, but he's a grand man all the same, if a red hot 'un. I wish I were he!"

"I don't. Come and have a drink!" And the two boys sauntered away in search of liquid refreshment.

Meanwhile Guelfo was being followed by something more substantial than glances, and as he turned into the building in which were his offices he heard his name whispered behind him.

"Mr Guelfo."

He stopped and looked round.

"Now what do you want? I'm busy this morning; can't attend you."

"I *must* see you and alone."

"Well, then, you can't. I tell you I'm busy."

Woolpert came close to the financier and whispered something in a low tone.

"Eh, what's that? Come this way!" And unlocking the side door of his private office Guelfo passed the man in, closed it behind him and then entered the next door leading to the general office of his set.

"I'll see no one. Mind I'm not disturbed," he said, as he quickly passed through it to his own room.

He found Woolpert standing beside the table.

"Now then—what's this infernal bother?" he asked in an irritable way.

"We've had a visit from that Italian, Balbi."

"What did he want?"

"To find out where we've put her. And he seemed pretty keen too."

"If he were, what does it matter? You didn't tell him?"

"Not likely. But it's awkward for me; I had to turn out."

"Turn out! Why?"

"He knew too much."

"Tell me all about it, and mind you tell me the truth."

Woolpert gave a graphic account of all that had taken place at Vivian Square a few nights previously. As he concluded, Guelfo said,—

"I shouldn't have minded if the chloroform had been too much for his heart. Well, a change will do you good. Vivian Square is not a particularly desirable locality."

"It suits me and the missis all right, and moving is expensive work."

"Look here, Woolpert, I've paid you well already. I see your game, and I'm not going to stand it. You won't find me a soft fool who will provide you with money whenever you want any. I'm not that sort, so drop it and clear out!" And Guelfo moved towards the door.

"Stop a bit, Mr Guelfo. You'd better for your own sake—"

"Clear out or I'll put you out!" cried Guelfo, unlocking the side door.

"I won't clear out until I'm paid. I'm not going to starve for you. Your name is worth something, I suppose, and if you don't make it worth my while I swear I'll blow the gaff all over the City this very day, and there won't be a man in the place as will look at you, much more speak to you."

"Oh, will you?" Guelfo left the door and coming close to his visitor he whispered something in his ear, and with a cruel smile watched the effects of his words.

The man started back and his face went as white as marble. He grasped at the table to steady himself and then sank limp and stricken into a chair.

"Now, do you think it would be wise to 'blow the gaff' as you very vulgarly term it, eh, Mr Woolpert? Don't you think a little change to a quiet, seaside place would be more beneficial to yourself and your good wife? You certainly look as if you need bracing up," continued Guelfo, in a cynical tone. "Out of consideration for her I shall be delighted to make you a little present," and he laid a five-pound note on the table. Then in a totally different voice—a voice in which anger, determination and command were mingled—he said, "But understand me, Woolpert, this is the last penny you have from me, and if I see the slightest sign of attempted trouble on your part, I'll crush you that minute. I'll show you no mercy. I've only to breathe a word and you know where you'd be. I mean it and you know it. Now go, and for your own sake keep out of my way in the future. It will be safer for you. You'll probably end your life like a dog, but I'd rather not have your death on my hands. Still—well, go before I say more." And as Guelfo unlocked the side door his visitor struggled to his feet, gathered up his note from off the table and tottered, without a word, from the room.

"That's the way to treat scum like that fellow!" Guelfo muttered, as he seated himself at his table. "Face them and they cringe to you! Show them you're their master and they become your slaves. I wish I had that cursed Italian in the same box.

He may give me trouble yet. Still, if he doesn't find Lucia, and he can't, I can defy him. It's only his word against mine, and which will carry the more weight: that of the great Guelfo or of the Italian miner? All the same, the sooner she's out of the country the better I shall be pleased. I'll see to this at once."

CHAPTER XXIV

DUE NORTH IN SEARCH OF TRUTH

BALBI's time was fully occupied now with the faint clue he had come across and the flotation of the new mine. He would have liked to have devoted it all to the discovery of Lucia, but the company business was a big affair, and so his frequent presence was required at the City office.

Taft had advised him to place the matter of the clue in the hands of a firm of private detectives, but Balbi would not hear of such a thing. He had no experience of their mode of procedure, and he was suspicious of paid agencies. He argued that though you pay a man to discover a secret for you, the other side may pay him equally well or better to be blind and see nothing, in which case both your time and money would be thrown away. No, he would carry the matter through himself, even if it took him longer.

He had seen Pauline and made her acquainted with all that had recently taken place, and together they had ascertained that the letters "ILLIN" could only belong to one postal town in Scotland, and that was Killin, at the foot of Loch Tay. While matters were in this position Taft was endeavouring to ascertain the address of his late workman, Raynor, and to obtain it without

raising suspicion in the minds of any of his other workmen. Balbi felt that if he could only get hold of Raynor he, being a member of the Pentagon Brotherhood, might then enable him to trace Woolpert who was also one of them. It will be remembered that Balbi, as far as he knew, had never seen Raynor, and had only Taft's description to work on. And yet from that description he had a very strong suspicion that it must have been Raynor who, in conjunction with Woolpert, so baffled him that evening at Vivian Square.

One morning, previous to going to the City, he called at Mount Street to see Pauline, and on inquiring for her was informed that she had left town suddenly an hour previously. "And, sir," continued the footman, "she left a letter addressed to you which was to be posted. If you will wait a moment I will ascertain if it has already gone." In a minute or two the man entered and handed Balbi the letter saying, "No, sir, here it is. The page-boy was just about to take it to the pillar-box."

Balbi opened it at once and read:—

"DEAR SIGNOR BALBI,—I have suddenly been called to Scotland through the illness of my aunt who, curiously enough, resides at 'The Glen,' Abermoy, Perthshire, not many miles from Killin. I am sorry not to have been able to see you again before setting off, but I had so short a notice. If I can be of any use in Scotland let me know, and I will gladly do all in my power to help you. In great haste,—Very sincerely yours,

"PAULINE SPENCER."

It was three or four days after this, during which Balbi had made no material advance in his quest, that he found, on his return to his hotel one evening, a telegram awaiting him:—

“Come as soon as possible. I have found out something.
PAULINE.”

It was too late to start that evening, but the following morning saw the little Italian at King's Cross, taking his ticket for the North. The station was crowded with men and a fair sprinkling of women and dogs, while among the piles of luggage gun-cases were as much in evidence as anything else. It only wanted a few days to the Saint's Day of St George. Hence the aspect of the station. It is a sight to be seen at no other time of the year.

As Balbi elbowed his way through the throng, intent upon getting a corner seat, he heard a voice behind him hailing him.

“Hollo, signore! Have you turned sportsman?” and looking round Balbi found himself face to face with Ellis and Kenrick, both clad in comfortable suits of tweed.

“No, Mr Ellis, my sporting days are over. But I'm off to Scotland all the same,” Balbi said, shaking hands with the two men.

“Then let us travel together; it will be more pleasant.”

“By all means. I shall be delighted.”

“But one thing, Balbi,” said Kenrick, “we bar any talking of business. We're out on pleasure now, and the first word of shop means standing whiskies-and-sodas at the next station we stop at.”

"Certainly. I'll not forget. But, gentlemen, will you have one with me before we start?"

"What do you say, Ellis?" asked Kenrick. "Shall we oblige the signore?"

"We might do worse, I think." And an adjournment was made to the refreshment-room, after which the three companions settled down with their papers and their pipes while they were whirled through the string of tunnels which lies between King's Cross and Huntingdon, and then through the vast fenland till they came to their first pause in sight of the grand old pile of Peterborough Cathedral. On again, past Grantham of gingerbread fame, Newark, Retford and Doncaster, catching sight in the far distance (for the day was clear) of another cathedral, that of Lincoln, crowning that lofty hill which astonishes so many who imagine the country to be as flat as your hand. And so on to yet a third cathedral city, that of York. There a thoughtful company gave them pause for a meal before hurrying on again to the still far-distant Highlands. But railway travelling is no novelty now, and there is no need to trace their further progress.

Eventually, when Balbi's companions parted company with him at the station before the one he himself was booked for, it was on the understanding that if he found leisure he was to run over and see them at Ellis's shooting-box at Urchay. So well had the conditions imposed before commencing the journey been observed by all parties that no one had been mulcted in a single fine, though it would not be wise to conclude, on that account, that they had gone thirsty all the time.

From inquiries at the station Balbi learned that "The Glen," Abermoy, was a mile and a half distant from Killin where he would stay; and having secured a room and had a wash and a change he set out to call on Pauline and learn the extent and nature of her discoveries. During the journey he had kept his feelings well under control, and had given his companions no indication of the cause of his visit north, but now that he was alone he felt strangely excited and impatient to learn what fortune awaited him.

"The Glen" was a low, stone-built house, lying close by the roadside, surrounded by a garden and well sheltered from the winds on three sides by plantations of firs. And it was in the garden that Balbi caught sight of Pauline sitting beneath a tree reading.

The sound of the latch made her look up and, catching sight of the little Italian, she hurried forward to meet him.

"Welcome to Scotland, signore!" she said, shaking hands with him. "You have lost no time in coming. But I knew you would not."

"Indeed, no, Miss Pauline," he replied. "How could I after your news? Is Lucia here? Tell me. The thought of seeing her again has filled my mind all the way from London. Say, are you taking care of her in this house—are you—?"

"No, no; you must be patient, signore," replied Pauline, smiling, "and not expect too much. Remember I do not know your Lucia as yet. I am going on little more than guess-work. But let me tell you all, and then you will be able to judge

better whether I was right in sending you the telegram I did."

"Oh yes, yes, you were quite right—quite right! You must pardon my impatience, Miss Pauline, but it came to me like a ray of hope amid the dark clouds of despair and made my heart beat again," cried the little man in an excited voice.

"Yes, I can quite appreciate all you feel, but I implore you not to expect too much, for you may be sadly disappointed. When I arrived here I am glad to say I found my aunt very much better than I had been led to expect. She had to a great extent recovered, so that there was no need for my being with her continually, and I had more time to myself than I had supposed would have been the case. Under the circumstances she insisted on my making use of her pony trap to drive about when the weather was fine, and in this way I have covered a good deal of country round here. And—"

"And you have found her. I am sure of it."

"No, no, Signor Balbi, I don't say that. But one day when driving through Glen Voil, a rather lonely spot, I came upon a woman sitting on a stone heap by the side of the road. I was not quite sure of the next turning which I ought to have taken to bring me back to Abermoy, so I pulled up and inquired of her. She answered me in what I at first took to be Gaelic. Of course I could not understand a word. Her manner was vacant and *distracte*. I asked her again, laying stress on the name Abermoy. She shook her head and muttered a few words, and I then perceived she was speaking in Italian. Unfortunately I do not know that

language but, remembering what you had told me and the postmark of Killin, the idea flashed across me that this might be Lucia. Again I spoke to her, mentioning names which, if she had been Lucia, would have been familiar to her. For instance I named Saffron Hill, your name, her maiden name, Malfi, and watched her face closely, but there was no indication that they recalled anything to her mind until I said 'Giuseppe Guelfo.' Then her face changed, and before I had any idea of her intention she uttered a low cry, sprang over the stone wall behind her and vanished into the wood which lay on the other side.

"It was Lucia. I know it!" exclaimed the Italian, who could hardly control his excitement. "And then you—"

"I was alone, signore. The pony was a restive little beastie; I could not leave it. It would not stand. I could do nothing but drive on."

"Ah! she is lost to me again, *per Bacco!* She is lost!"

"But since then," continued Pauline, taking no notice of the interruption, "I have been making inquiries, and I have discovered that Guelfo has a moor not far from Glen Voil. There is no shooting-box on it, only a cottage, where his keeper resides all by himself, and this man, Archie M'Queen, does not bear the best of characters."

"I go to him at once. She is there. I know it, I feel it. My Lucia is in his power, in his hands. I will strike him down without mercy!" And Balbi sprang to his feet and was hurrying over the grass when Pauline called to him,—

"Signor Balbi, stop, stop! Don't be so excited. Let me finish."

"Pardon, signorina, I forget myself. I am going mad I think. But I *will* be calm." And conquering his excitement he came and sat down again.

"You will have no success if you cannot control yourself," she said sternly. "You have not even heard all I have to tell you."

"Ah, signorina, have patience with me. You know not what my feelings are."

"I think I can guess them, signore, but at the same time I know that to succeed you must act warily. How would Mr Vipan have behaved, under the circumstances? Think of that."

"You are right, signorina. I am a *bambino*, a fool. I will be calm. Tell me all."

"I was going to say that when the woman disappeared among the trees I heard another voice, followed by a cry, and then all was still. I think that someone met her there."

"The villain! I will—no, I am calm. And where is this Glen Voil, signorina?"

"Come with me. There is a large map of Perthshire in the house, and I can show you the exact spot."

Together they left the garden and spent some time in the hall of the house where the map hung. As Pauline accompanied her visitor to the gate, on his departure, she said,—

"If you take my advice you will learn all you can about Archie M'Queen. He is well known in Killin, and you might be able to pick up some information which might be of service to you, before paying him a visit. Have your

preparations complete before you take any definite steps, and remember that a stranger in these parts is different to a stranger in London, and that his presence is apt to arouse curiosity among the country people. Let me know of your doings continually, and rely on me if you think I can help you in any way. And now good-bye and good luck to you."

That evening Balbi wandered down the street of the little town of Killin and contrived to get into conversation with some of the inhabitants, who were lounging about enjoying the warm summer night. But he was most careful and guarded in his inquiries, confining them for the most part to the topic at that time on everyone's mind—the game and the neighbouring moors. He learned the names of many of the owners who had already come into residence, and also the prospects of sport in the locality. Guelfo's name was mentioned, but no one appeared to know if he were coming for the opening of the season.

"Eh, but there's Archie M'Queen himself!" said one man to whom Balbi was at the moment talking, indicating a figure clad in the kilt who was entering one of the inns. "He'll be able to tell you. He's Guelfo's keeper."

"Oh, don't trouble about it. It's nothing to me. I'm a stranger here and no sportsman."

"Then I would no fash him. He's a kittle body to ha' to do wi', and varra uncertain in his temper."

"It sha'n't be tried by me," replied Balbi, with a laugh, as he lounged away. But later on he turned in at the bar of the inn he had seen

M'Queen enter, and there found him among a crowd of gillies, keepers and lingers-on, who were smoking, drinking and talking over the rapidly-approaching Twelfth.

Many eyes were turned on the stranger as he entered, but he called for his whisky like the rest, and soon found himself admitted to the conversation that was going about. He played his part well, asking casual questions, and not attempting to approach M'Queen, who, he observed, kept out of the general circle, and was talking in a low tone to a savage, low-looking man who had not the open, healthy, jolly appearance of the generality of the keepers and gillies.

When at length the hour of closing came, Balbi had made a good impression. He had stood glasses to many of his new friends, had shown himself a good listener and had successfully assumed an interest he did not feel in their doings and business.

He was standing just by the door as M'Queen and his companion emerged, and he caught the words,—

"Then let it be on Wednesday. Tell Jack I'll have all ready. Bring the stuff Tuesday night, but don't come nigh the place till then."

"Na, na! It'll be a'rect. I'll keep awa'. It shall be a bonny brew this time."

What did these strange words mean?"

CHAPTER XXV

MYSTERY AT GLEN VOIL

THE following morning Balbi paid a visit to the post-office which combined its official business with that of a small shop, and expended a penny in the purchase of a sheet of notepaper and an envelope. It was a penny thrown away. He saw this at the first glance, for the paper was of a far superior quality to the sheet which had afforded him his first clue. Proceeding in the direction in which Glen Voil lay, and just upon the outskirts of the town, he came upon another small shop, which might be best described as general in its character, as it seemed to deal in everything from dress material to peg tops. Again he asked for a sheet of paper and an envelope, and again he was supplied, and this time his money was not wasted.

The sheet handed to him was of identically the same description and nature as the half sheet he already possessed. It was not much, but still it was another link in the chain he was forging. At least it might be a link, he could not feel sure as yet.

And now, without further delay, he set forward on his scouting expedition, an expedition in which he displayed his old adventurous instinct in the matter of concealment and deception. Directly he

had left the town behind him his strategy commenced. He knew perfectly well the direction of Glen Voil, but walked in an opposite one, doubling back behind a rise which hid his movements from the town of Killin. Certainly there were not many inhabitants in the open country, but the Twelfth was close at hand and the game-keepers and gillies would be about the moors, and the presence of a stranger away from the roads would be quickly noted and commented on.

In due time he reached the glen and the wood in which the supposed Lucia had disappeared. He searched this carefully for footmarks, broken twigs, or any other indications of her presence, and his care was quickly rewarded. He found a series of small footprints leading from the wall bounding the road, on which the wheelmarks of a light cart were still visible—marks which clearly showed the vehicle had been there, just as Pauline had stated.

Balbi had no doubt on this point, for in addition to the indentations there were the scratches on the stones made by the pawing of a restless pony. But within the wood matters were by no means so satisfactory, for the smaller footprints, after being joined by others of a much larger size, led on to a path, or drive, cut through the wood, the soil of which was quite baked and hard, and here he lost all further trace of them.

The Italian searched diligently, but he could find nothing more, and quitting the wood at the side remote from the road he made his way up and over the hill to the moor rented by Guelfo, at one corner of which stood M'Queen's cottage.

Very careful indeed was he as he approached the comparatively flat expanse before it. He went down on his hands and knees and crawled through the heather, until at length he gained a position from which he could observe the cottage and the approach to it from the road far below the valley. Here, in a warm sunny nest on a bed of springy heather, he kept watch through the long, hot day, employing his time in evolving plans for the discovery of the woman he loved so well.

That she was not in the cottage he was soon convinced. It was too small for two persons, and contained but one room. Not a sign of life was visible about it. The door and window were fast shut, and not a wreath of smoke escaped from the one chimney. No, if Lucia were in the custody of the owner of the cottage, he did not keep his prisoner there.

It was not until the sun had sunk behind the purple hills that Balbi's patience was rewarded by the appearance of M'Queen slowly toiling up the ascent from the distant road. At length he reached the strip of land within the fence before the cottage, which was intended for a garden, but which was bare of both flowers and vegetables, and bending down, rose again with something in his hand, evidently the key, since he unlocked the door and entered.

Still Balbi waited, though he was well-nigh starving, not having tasted food since his early breakfast, and when the shadows were falling thick and objects in the distance were growing indistinct and misty, M'Queen again came into view. Having locked the door behind him he carefully surveyed

the open land about him, and then, shouldering something which Balbi could not define, but which looked very like a twisted stick, and with a small basket in his hand, he set out across the moor, passing within fifty yards of the spot where the watcher lay concealed.

Balbi did not move until the man had got far beyond him, and then, crouching down so as to be almost below the level of the tufts of heather, an old Peruvian dodge, he followed him. As soon as he had reached the edge of the moor and had commenced the descent in the direction of the wood, Balbi hurried forward, but when he too came to the edge and the slope downward was opened out, not a trace of M'Queen was visible. He had vanished utterly and completely, as though the earth had swallowed him.

Strain his eyes as he might Balbi could see no sign of him, and as it had now grown so dark that objects were fast becoming invisible even near at hand, the Italian deemed it hopeless to wait longer and gave up his endeavours for that day. But before returning to Killin he hurried back to M'Queen's cottage and made a search where he had seen the man bend down. He immediately came upon the door key hidden beneath a stone. Of his discovery he took no advantage at that time; he felt sure it would always be there when he required it, and having glanced through the small window and by the glow of the embers still smouldering in the grate—for M'Queen had lit a fire on his return—gained a knowledge of the inner appearance of the cottage, he set off for the hotel.

He was well satisfied with his day's work, and after a hearty supper strolled down to the inn he had visited the previous evening. Here he found many of those whose acquaintance he had already made, and joining them he talked openly of the charming excursion he had had over the moors and asked many questions about the neighbourhood, just as a stranger would do who, without any very definite object, was enjoying the freedom of the Highlands.

It was almost closing time when M'Queen appeared, and his companion of the previous evening not being present he joined the party among which Balbi was sitting. The Italian took no special notice of him, but managed to address a remark or two in a casual way, drawing him into the conversation, but avoiding anything which might suggest his knowing where he lived or what was his occupation.

M'Queen was evidently a reserved man. He said but little, and what he did say was of small interest, but Balbi could not help noticing that his few remarks were framed with a view of learning what he—Balbi—was doing in the neighbourhood and whether he had come for the shooting. In the most innocent and unsuspecting manner Balbi let it appear that he was an idler and a lover of nature, with no object save that of enjoying himself amid the glorious scenery of the neighbourhood.

The following morning the Italian was up early and then set off for his coign of vantage of the previous day. He gained it unperceived, and this time had not such a long wait, for he had

not been settled in the heather many minutes before M'Queen appeared and commenced washing some large stone jars at the spring which emerged from a mass of rock beside his cottage. Six of these same jars did he rinse out, and then turning them topsy-turvey to drain, he locked up the cottage and made his way down the hill in the direction of Killin.

From the edge of the heathery plateau Balbi watched him for a mile or more, and then, with a glance round to make sure that he himself was not under observation, he hurried to the cottage and, taking the key from its hiding-place, entered. It was an ordinary Highland cottage, with the bed in a kind of bunk, or cupboard in the wall, having sliding doors in front so that it could be closed in and hidden during the daytime when not in use. The furniture was of the roughest description and the shelves contained but little crockery and few cooking utensils. It was clearly the abode of a rough bachelor. Balbi was about to leave when his eye was caught by a speck of colour showing beneath the patchwork cushion of the chair. He drew it out.

It was a cherry-coloured silk scarf which he recognised at once as one he had given Lucia only a short time previously.

He replaced it where he had found it, and in doing so his eye fell on a scrap of paper on the hearth among the ashes. He picked it up and found it to be half an envelope on which an attempt had been made to write Guelfo's name and address at the Albany, but so many mistakes and corrections had been made that the writer

appeared to have given it up in despair and thrown it aside as useless.

Balhi did the same; it had told him its story and was of no further use to him.

Leaving the cottage he turned to the row of big jars, and out of pure curiosity took one up and examined it.

"Whisky! The cognac of the English!" he exclaimed, as he sniffed at the opening. "Now, what on earth can M^r.Queen want with such a stock as these must hold? Highlanders are credited with being able to put away their fair whack, but it would take even a Scotchman a considerable time to assimilate the contents of these."

In replacing the key his quick eye fell upon a footmark impressed in the soil, which had been damp, but which was now baked hard and firm, and he was quick to notice the impress of a curious arrangement of the hob-nails with which the sole was covered. He knelt down and made a very careful survey of them, and then left the cottage.

He had no definite object in view, save the general one of the discovery of Lucia, and he allowed his footsteps to lead him where they would. As it happened, they took him in the direction of Glen Voil, though not by the same path by which he had ascended the previous day, and some time after leaving the moor he found himself beside a little burn whose turbid waters chattered and laughed over the pebbles and rocks on its way to the broad waters of Loch Tay far below.

He sat down beside the stream. The day was very hot, and the spot in which he found himself was an ideal resting-place. A large mass of rugged rock jutted out from the hill-side, towering above him and affording a oasis of grateful shade. He was wondering what should be his next proceeding when, in moving one of his feet, he happened to dislodge a clod of the brown earth and exposed to view an iron pipe.

He kicked it with his boot. There was no mistake. It was an iron pipe, the very last thing he would have expected to have come across on that deserted hill-side. What was the use of it, and where did it lead to? And then the idea struck him that it might be in connection with a reservoir formed in the hill-side for supplying some one of the few gentlemen's houses in the valley with pure water. Still, it was curious, and when he reached his hotel he would make inquiries. He would go back at once, he could do no more that day; at present he had not sufficient materials to aid him, apart from the presence of M'Queen himself. Without him he was merely wandering aimlessly in the dark. On M'Queen, therefore, his attention must be fixed.

He was leaving his resting-place on his way to the wood, meaning to pass through it again to the road, when he picked up the second half of the envelope, the other portion of which he had seen in M'Queen's cottage. It had been utilised as a tobacco pouch, for it contained some coarse-cut Cavendish, and had probably been drawn out of its owner's pocket in the removal of something

else. M'Queen, or one of his friends, had therefore been near the spot recently, and as if to emphasise the fact Balbi found, not many yards farther away, another footprint in a marshy spot, which tallied exactly with that he had seen outside the cottage.

Surely these various facts were leading him closer and closer to his goal.

It was mid-day when he reached his hotel, and having lunched he set off for Abermoy, in order to discuss matters with Pauline and ask her advice.

He was surprised on entering the garden to find Ellis and Roland Kenrick there, chatting with Pauline. They had driven over from Urchay, and their hostess had prevailed on them to put up their horse and stay to tea.

The little party was a pleasant one. Pauline was in good spirits, her aunt was on the highroad to complete recovery, and she had therefore no anxiety to depress her.

"It's almost a shame to mention the word City among such lovely surroundings as these, Miss Spencer," Ellis said, "but I heard this morning from town, and the last sensation is that Sir Charles Olcott has come to utter grief, gone to smash for an immense sum, and the worst part of it is he's 'wanted' and has bolted."

"Really!" exclaimed Pauline, "I'm sorry, but hardly surprised. We used to see something of him some time since. My father and he were connected with the same companies."

"Oh, I don't think you need fear it will affect Lord Oxendale. I don't believe he has had anything to do with him for some time. He's more

likely to have bitten Guelfo ; they've been hand and glove for some time past."

"Ah, *he's* not had rosy times lately. And the Belgravian affair will give him a good shaking up, I expect. Mark my words, there'll be a big smash somewhere very soon," declared Kenrick.

"Well, Miss Spencer won't thank us for talking shop, and it's time we were setting off. If you'll excuse me I'll go and see about putting the horse in." And Ellis moved off towards the stables, followed by Balbi, who wished to ask him a question or two respecting the great financier.

When they returned, Ellis driving the trap, they found Miss Spencer and Kenrick in earnest conversation, and there was a bright light in Pauline's eyes and an expression of happiness on her face that had not been there for months. Still, when her two guests had gone and she and Balbi were alone together, she was eager to hear how his efforts were progressing and whether he had succeeded in obtaining any definite information. Pauline was very far from being a selfish woman and could put her own interests aside where those of others were concerned.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PATHWAY OF DANGER

SEVERAL days had passed; the Twelfth had come and gone, and the keenness of the shooters had had its edge taken off. Balbi was still on the war-path, ever out on the moor, watching M'Queen as a cat watches a mouse. So far he had obtained but small reward for his pains, but his patience was far from being exhausted. His non-success only spurred him on to greater exertions. He had endeavoured to cultivate M'Queen, but without any result; the Highlander kept aloof from him and would respond to none of his overtures.

At the inn he met him nightly, but was no more familiar with him than on the first evening he had gone there. Balbi, too, was growing desperate, and on this particular day—it was Tuesday—he remembered the words he had heard M'Queen utter the first time he had met him as to an appointment for Wednesday. He made up his mind that he would follow him back to the cottage that night and watch, it might be, the whole night long. He had had him under observation during the day time so constantly without seeing anything suspicious in his doing that he concluded that, if the man were really defying the law, it was at night only that he could be brought to book.

Having finished his dinner, and before sauntering out as was his custom, he called the landlord and informed him that he might not return that evening, and that if he were not back shortly after closing-time, they were not to expect him.

He found the usual company at the inn with M'Queen among them, and the evening passed in the ordinary manner, except that the Highlander left rather sooner than was his wont. Balbi had seen him preparing to leave and had quitted the place before him on the plea of having had a long day. Hurrying through the village he took up his position among the trees in Glen Voil, and awaited his coming. He must pass that way, even if he did not take the short cut to his cottage through the wood.

He had not been there long when he heard footsteps on the road, and could distinctly make out there were two people walking in company. He was in doubt whether one of them could be M'Queen, for the man had never before been accompanied by anyone on his homeward way. The footsteps paused, there were a few low-spoken words beside the wall, and then two figures passed his hiding-place, one of them bearing a sack upon his shoulders.

Very silently Balbi crept forth and followed. Tracked and tracker passed through the wood and out on to the bare hill-side. There was no moon, but still the night was not so dark that objects near at hand could not be distinguished, and Balbi had no difficulty in keeping the shadowy forms ahead of him in view, as long as their background was only grass or heather, but

directly they came in front of rocks they seemed to vanish instantly.

Up the hill the three figures crept in absolute silence. Not even a footfall could be heard. The two in front paused from time to time, and the load was shifted from one man to the other. At length they came to the mass of rock beneath which Balbi had rested a few days previously. Here he lost sight of them, and waited for them to reappear on the other side. But his waiting was in vain.

They had vanished and left not a trace behind. For half an hour Balbi remained motionless with his eyes fixed on the rocky mass, and then very cautiously he ventured to approach a little nearer, taking advantage of every bush and stone by way of cover, but not a sign could he perceive of the men he had followed. He was certain they had not passed beyond, but where they had hidden he could not tell. When he had been there in the daylight he had not perceived any crannies or clefts in which they might conceal themselves. It was a mystery to him. Still, they must reappear, and he waited.

Another half-hour passed, and then, to his utter astonishment, a square of dull red light appeared almost at the foot of the mass of rock, and silhouetted against it was the dark figure of a man. The light vanished, and shortly afterwards someone passed close to the spot where he lay concealed, going downward towards the wood.

One of the men was accounted for. What of the other? Balbi still waited. All was again silent, save for the faint sighing of the wind. It was

cold, cheerless work sitting watching on the hill-side, but the Italian, used to hardship and expectancy in his Peruvian days, was not one to give in. He had his task to perform, and would carry it through to the very end. How long he waited he had no idea; it seemed hours, when a faint noise from the direction of the valley fell on his ear. He was all alert in a moment. Again two men made their way past him, one bearing a second sack, but neither of them was M'Queen, this much he was able to recognise. They, too, disappeared against the mass of rock above him, nor did they reappear on the farther side. He waited. The faint sound of metal striking stone reached his ear. He stood upright against the trunk of a mountain ash, and as the square of ruddy light reappeared for a few moments, he took its bearings through a fork of the tree and the top of a bush beyond.

In daylight he would now be able to discover exactly where the light came from.

Again he waited, but not for so long this time, for, without any warning or the reappearance of the light, he was aware of two figures silently passing his hiding-place, while a third could be seen beyond the rocks against the hill-side.

He allowed them all to get far away before he moved, and then his curiosity was so great that he went at once to the rock and endeavoured to discover the secret of the ruddy light. Naturally he failed, and a few moments' consideration was sufficient to convince him of the folly of the attempt, but he knew that, having taken the bearings, it only required the light of day to

enable him to unravel at least a portion of the secret.

It was now long past the time the hotels and inns were closed, and there was no chance of gaining admittance. But this did not trouble him. He had roughed it so long in those untrodden wilds in South America that a night in the open was but of small account to him. And his recent wanderings over the country side had made him acquainted with many a snug spot where he could rest in comparative shelter and comfort. Selecting one of these he turned up his collar, buttoned his coat tightly, tied his handkerchief over his head, and lay down to snatch a few hours' slumber.

He was awake with the break of day, and made his way back to the place whence he had watched the previous evening. By the aid of the fork of the tree and the bush acting as a foresight, he quickly located the spot where the light had appeared. It was a bank of dried, sunburnt turf sloping up to the face of the rock.

He was just about to go up to it and examine it when he heard a faint sound on the hill-side above. Throwing himself down among the heather and bracken he lay as still as death.

The sounds came nearer and then ceased; he waited, and when all had been silent for some time, he raised his head carefully and looked.

The bank of turf had vanished and had given place to a smooth face of rock, and not a living thing was in sight.

While he was making up his mind what to do, to his utter amazement the face of rock on which

his eyes were fixed moved, and from the black cavity thus revealed, M'Queen appeared. He replaced the slab of stone and, having spread the turf over it, hurried down the hill towards the wood.

There was no hesitation now on Balbi's part. He had M'Queen under his thumb, and it rested with him when he should take action. The hiding-place could not escape: M'Queen might. Therefore, M'Queen must be kept under observation. Already Balbi could see him hurrying along the road towards Killin. He followed him, but kept along the rough hill-side, avoiding the road. The little town was astir already. Keepers, gillies and shooting ponies were waiting about the chief hotel, which was now crammed to overflowing with sportsmen.

With many of these M'Queen stopped and exchanged a word or two. Balbi entered the post-office and wrote a telegram. The instrument was already busy clicking away, recording the words which had been committed to it hundreds of miles away.

The office was a very small one, and as the Italian stood with his filled-in form waiting at the wire grating while the telegraph clerk wrote out the words the instrument was at that moment conveying to her ear in a series of clicks, he was easily able to read the words she was transcribing. The first his eyes fell on had riveted his attention, and he had no scruples in continuing his reading.

"M'QUEEN, KILLIN.—Shall be with you eleven to-morrow night and will relieve you of burden.—G."

G! Could it stand for Guelfo?

Such were the words he read, and he had the utmost difficulty in speaking calmly to the girl when, after having folded up the pink slip of paper, placed it in the orange-coloured envelope, directed it and slipped it into a rack, she turned her attention to him. Taking the form from him, she counted the words. "Eightpence halfpenny," she said; and as he was feeling for the money he heard a voice behind him,—

"Any message for me this morning, Miss Ramsay?"

"Yes, Mr M'Queen. I was waiting for the boy to come back to send it out to you. It must have been handed in after we were shut last night, for it came through just now." And she passed the envelope over the *grille*.

"Thank you." And it was not until he got outside that the man opened it and read its contents.

That telegram had relieved Balbi from a lot of watching that could only have been labour thrown away. It was no longer necessary for him to shadow M'Queen; he knew he would not go far away, and till that evening Balbi had his time to himself.

His first proceeding was to return to his hotel, change his things, have a bath and a good breakfast, and then, retiring to his room, he lay down and slept soundly until the early part of the afternoon. From that time onward until half-past five, when he set off for Abermoy, he was busy with a variety of preparations, and he did not forget to unload and recharge his revolver.

Entering the garden at Abermoy he found Ellis

and Kenrick had already arrived and were seated talking to Pauline.

"Ah, here comes the mysterious man!" exclaimed Ellis, catching sight of him. "Now, what is it, Balbi, that you want of us? for I suppose it is no secret from Miss Spencer that you wired us to meet you here?"

"None whatever," replied the Italian. "She knows more about the matter than you do. And it is that she, as well as you, might learn what I propose that I took the liberty of asking you to meet me here."

"I was only too glad you did so," said Pauline, "and very anxious I am to hear your latest news, for from your face you have some."

"Yes, I have, but, signorina, in order that our friends may understand matters, I had better give them an account of what has taken place from the time I parted from our dead friend among the Cordilleras of Peru."

"Certainly, tell them all. Are we not friends?"

For an hour Balbi had the conversation to himself, the others only now and then asking a question or making an observation on something which occurred to them.

When he had finished, Ellis, who had been sitting with his eyes fixed upon the ground for some time, said with a sigh,—

"There never was a truer saying than that your sin will find you out. I don't feel fit to be in your society, for, do you know, I was with Guelfo when he went out to Peru to make the most of an advantage he had not come by squarely. I sacrificed my peace of mind to my lust for gold, and I

can honestly say, though the word 'honestly' may sound strange from my lips, I have never felt really comfortable since. I have endeavoured to stifle my conscience, but it will be heard. But this I can say, Miss Spencer, that since you have honoured me with your friendship I have done my best to mend my ways. I have really and truly tried to keep my hands clean. It is no easy task to do this in the City, but there are those who accomplish it"—with a glance at Kenrick—"and I would give all I possess if I could wipe out some pages of my life and start fair again."

Pauline did not reply, but only laid her hand for a moment on one of his—an action which gave him more comfort than any words she could have spoken.

"Mr Ellis, I never placed you on the same level as Guelfo, never from the first, and as far as I am myself concerned I bear you no ill-will, as I have endeavoured to show. All that is past is past. I have forgotten it. You are my friend if you will let me say so." And the good-hearted Italian held out his hand to Ellis, who took it and then walked away for a few minutes to hide his emotion.

When he returned the incident was closed, but there was a stronger feeling of *camaraderie* than ever binding the little party together.

Now all the conversation turned on the adventure the three men were about to undertake. There was danger in it, they knew, but they would willingly face that, and Balbi felt that he could have no stauncher helpers than the two Englishmen who had consented to aid him in his task.

"Signor Balbi," said Pauline, when at length, after having had some refreshment, they were preparing to leave, "if you are successful, you are to bring the signorina here. My aunt will not mind—I will speak to her about it—and I will take care of her. She may require careful nursing; we do not know what she may not have gone through."

"A thousand thanks. I will not refuse your kindness. I will bring her, for I *shall* find her—I feel it, and that man Guelfo—" And the fierce light of a terrible anger flashed in the eyes of the little man.

"Remember, I shall be awake and looking out for you. I will make all preparations in case you return. And now good-bye, good luck and a complete success attend you."

And Pauline returned to the house as the three men vanished into the gloom on their pathway of direst danger.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN A TIGHT CORNER

BALBI did not conduct his companions by the path through the wood he had so frequently taken before, but, striking up the hill at a point much nearer Killin, they worked along the mountain-side. At some distance from the spot he was aiming for they stopped and held a consultation, or rather the two Englishmen listened to Balbi's directions, undertaking to comply with them.

It was settled they should creep on as noiselessly as possible until they reached the rocks, and then, if everything was quiet, that Balbi should go forward and endeavour to discover the secret of the opening when, if successful, they should all pass in together and act as occasion offered.

Very slow was their progress. They exercised the utmost caution not to make a sound. It was growing close to the hour Balbi had heard mentioned at the inn doorway for the meeting, and in all probability they would come across some of those who were to be present.

They were drawing near the spot when Balbi, who was leading, stopped. The wind blowing towards him bore the scent of burning turf to his nostrils.

"Do you smell anything?" he whispered, as the others came up to him.

"Yes, turf," they answered together.

"Can you see any smoke? The fire must be near, the scent is so strong."

They peered into the gloom, but could perceive nothing.

Again they went on, the smell growing more and more marked.

"Stop here," whispered Balbi. "I think I see something." And leaving his companions he crawled high up the slope on their right hand. So silently did he return that he was on them before they were aware of his presence. "It's smoke right enough, coming through a cranny in the rock. Some of them must be in the place already."

Again they moved forward until they reached the spot whence Balbi had seen the light on the previous evening.

"If I whistle, come to me at once," he whispered as he again left them.

In the darkness they waited, anxiously straining their eyes to watch the movements of their companion. They could just mistily make out his figure bending down at the foot of the rocks, but all was still silent. Then, hardly audibly above the sighing of the wind, came a low whistle. They hurried forward.

"I've found it. The stone moves! There are two of them inside. When I throw it back, rush in. I'll take M'Queen, you make for the other man, Kenrick, and Ellis stay and close the stone behind us and then come to whichever of us wants his help. Do you understand?"

"Right—right," answered the two men, and as they braced themselves up for what they knew would be a tough struggle, Balbi dragged away the stone and sprang into the opening.

Before them lay a passage sloping steeply downwards and opening at the foot into a large cave, at the end of which was a big peat fire, burning fiercely, while over it hung a closed metal vessel, from the cover of which came a worm ending in another vessel set on the floor near the fire. The two Englishmen recognised in a moment that they were in one of the illicit distilleries of which there are so many scattered over the wilder parts of Scotland and Ireland, where the "mountain dew" and "poteen" have their birth. One side of the cave was pierced by an iron pipe from which ran a copious stream of pure water, falling into a channel and led off through some unseen opening to rejoin the burn lower down. The whole place was fitted up with everything needful for the unlawful industry.

In addition to the fire it was lighted by three or four candles stuck to the rocks by their own grease. Bending over the vessel, with his back towards them, was M'Queen, while his companion, whom Balbi did not recognise, was busy getting some turf out of a corner with which to replenish the flames. Neither of them were at first aware of their presence, so quietly had they entered, but at the sound of Balbi's voice they swung round and for the moment stood stock-still, immovable with astonishment.

The Italian's revolver was out like a flash and covered the Scotchman, while Kenrick had stolen

behind the other man and pinioned his arms so that he could do nothing.

"Stir and you die!" cried the Italian. "Keep still and we sha'n't hurt you. We have not come after your whisky, but we have come for your prisoner, Archie M'Queen, and by heaven! I'll shoot you like a dog if you don't produce her at once."

"Hoot, mon, what pris'ner? What are ye hawering aboot the noo?" replied M'Queen, endeavouring to assume a careless air.

"No nonsense. Where have you hidden the signorina whom that double-dyed villain, Guelfo, placed in your charge? Quick?"

"And who might the mon Guelfo be?" asked M'Queen, posing as a puzzled innocent.

"I am no talker—if you don't answer quick, before I count three, I fire."

One—two—three. And the cavern re-echoed with the explosion of the pistol, while a large flake of stone fell from the wall behind the Scotchman with a clatter on the floor. Balbi had aimed a foot or more wide of his head, but the shot had effected its purpose.

"Stay, mon, stay, ye will na kill me? I'll speak. Haud yer hond!" cried M'Queen, his face convulsed with terror and trembling so that he could hardly stand.

"Speak then, and quickly, or the next shot will be better aimed. One—two—"

"Come this way. She's here." And with eyes, almost starting from his head, fixed upon the muzzle of the revolver which still covered him M'Queen backed towards a part of the cavern which lay in deep shadow.

Without removing his eyes from him Balbi said,—

“Look carefully after your man, Kenrick,” and followed.

Behind a buttress or rock they came upon a rough wooden partition in which was a door. M'Queen stopped. “She's there,” he said.

“Open the door.”

“It's locked, and I have not got the key.”

“One—two—”

There was no need for Balbi to say more. In a second or two the door was open, and in the dim light beyond, dazed and semi-conscious, seated upon the side of a rough bed, Balbi caught sight of the woman he had loved so long and so faithfully.

With a cry of joy, thrusting M'Queen aside so violently that he stumbled and fell, the Italian sprang forward and clasped her in his arms, showering kisses on her face and pouring words of love and endearment in Italian into her ears.

At first there was no response on her part. She lay in his embrace impassive, unresisting and silent, and then as something woke her numbed consciousness to life once more, she raised her head and gazing into the eyes which were devouring her cried in a voice tremulous with startled joy,—

“Piero! Piero mio!”

Meanwhile M'Queen had picked himself up and had rapidly passed back to the large cavern, seizing on his way a piece of iron piping that lay on the rocky floor, and rushed at Kenrick, who had forced his man to the ground and was holding him down. He raised his weapon to strike, but it was seized

from behind, wrenched from his hand, and the blow he intended for another fell on his own head, and with a groan he rolled over on the floor. It was Ellis who, having succeeded in replacing the slab which served as a door, had come so opportunely to the rescue of his friend.

Finding a piece of cord they tied the hands of the second prisoner behind him, and then, as M'Queen showed no signs of returning consciousness, they were free to help Balbi, who was tenderly assisting the tottering steps of Lucia from her prison-house.

As she emerged into the fuller light of the central cave a look of terror came into her eyes when she caught sight of Kenrick and Ellis, and she clung more tightly to Balbi, but he murmured something in Italian in her ear, and the look was lost in one of infinite confidence and trust. Already the presence of the lover of her youth, one of her own race, had commenced her recovery.

"What shall we do with this treacherous brute, Balbi?" said Ellis, indicating with his foot the unconscious form of M'Queen. "He deserves a good deal more than he's got, though I warrant he'll wake up with a headache, for I laid it on pretty thick."

"Leave him where he is. We've got all we want here, and we don't wish to be dragged in as witnesses by the Excise people. We didn't come whisky-hunting," said Kenrick.

"No. Leave him there. We have accomplished our object, and now to place Lucia where she will have proper care is all I can attend to," said Balbi, moving towards the sloping passage. But just at

that moment a sound above him caused him to pause and sign to his companions to retreat behind the projections of the rocks, as he at the same time drew Lucia out of sight.

Someone had entered the passage and was carefully descending towards the cave.

"Where are ye the noo?" exclaimed the new-comer, not at first seeing the two prostrate forms.

Ellis quickly slipped from his hiding-place and got behind him and the entrance. It was one of the gang of distillers, a man Balbi had never seen before.

"Here we are!" replied Ellis, enjoying the fellow's surprise. "What can we do for you?"

"Eh! sakes alive!" exclaimed the man, turning in astonishment, and terror, and then making as though he would force his way back again. But Kenrick had him in his grip in a second, and a turn or two of a second piece of rope rendered him as harmless as his companions.

"We'll leave them here. M'Queen will set them free when he comes to, and you may be sure they'll keep their mouths shut for their own sakes. Come along," said Balbi.

And to the accompaniment of a chorus of Gaelic oaths and imprecations, the little party made their way out of the cave that had served both as a prison-house and a distillery.

The fresh night air seemed to revive the Italian woman in a marvellous way; each moment her steps grew stronger, and already she had spoken several words to Babli, words which showed that her sense of reason was returning.

"We'll get to Abermoy as quickly as we can," said Balbi; "and this will be the shortest way. Let me go first. I know the path well by now." And with Lucia hanging on his arm he led the way downwards towards the wood. They were just about to enter it when a figure emerged from beneath the thick shadows of the trees and approached them. At the distance of only a few yards a voice said,—

"Ah, that's right, M'Queen, I thought you might perhaps bring her to meet me, and save time. How is—"

"Accidenti! At last I have you! And dropping the arm of Lucia Balbi sprang like a tiger on the astonished Guelfo and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, at the same time pouring on him a torrent of abuse in his native tongue. Vainly did Guelfo struggle; the little man^o was the more active and clung to him like a leech.

The ground was rough, and Guelfo lost his footing and fell. As he did so, Balbi hissed at him in a voice full of passion,—

"Think not that I have finished with you, you son of a pig! You hound! I will never rest till I have dogged you to destruction. As you have done your best to ruin two lives, so shall your own be ruined. For this end I have worked since we met at Cuzco, and already my reward is in sight. Were I alone with you now, it should be a struggle till the death, though you are not worth it, you dog!" And Balbi spat upon him.

"To the death then be it," snarled Guelfo, lying among the heather. "Only it shall be yours, not mine."

There was a flash and a loud report, followed by a heavy groan, and springing to his feet Guelfo tore down the hill and vanished in the blackness of the wood.

"Diavolo!" growled Balbi, as he rushed after him. "You shall pay for this. Now I *will* kill you; nothing shall save you now, you treacherous scoundrel!"

Down the hill the two men raced, but Balbi's rage, terrible in its intensity, drove caution from his mind and, not looking where he placed his feet, he tripped over a protruding stone and fell heavily. He was quickly up again, shaken and a little dazed, but the delay was sufficient to allow Guelfo to get some way ahead, and when at last Balbi scrambled over the wall on to the road, it was only to hear the rapid series of explosions and to dimly see the outline of a powerful motor fast disappearing in the gloom of the summer night.

The Italian commenced to give chase, but a few seconds were sufficient to convince him that his efforts were useless and, panting and breathless, he returned to his friends on the hill-side.

"He has got away, curse him! But I will never rest till I run him down. He shall not laugh at us; his turn has come, and—"

"Hush, man, never mind the villain now. There is something serious to see to. Ellis has been shot—"

"Ellis shot! Is this devil's work never to end? But it is only another item to add to the long account."

It was true. The bullet which had been in

tended for Balbi had found its billet in the man who had come to aid him. Ellis was bleeding profusely from a wound in the shoulder, and was almost insensible. Beside him knelt Lucia. The occasion had served to completely reawaken her clouded mind. All her womanly nature was roused by the sight of suffering, and very tenderly and gently she tended the wounded man.

Fortunately they were not far from the little burn, and Balbi fetched water in his hat, and then returning to the cave unbound one of the prisoners and compelled him to produce whisky and come with him to assist in bearing Ellis back to Killin, where a carriage was obtained to convey him to Abermoy.

It was not until they had reached the house that the extent of his injury could be ascertained. Then it was found that, happily, the wound was not a dangerous one, and that a short time would probably find him himself again.

It was a busy night at Abermoy. No one slept, and by the first morning train Balbi, taking Lucia with him, sped away south to complete the vengeance he had commenced, leaving Ellis to the care of Kenrick and Pauline.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNITES TWO HEARTS

"YOU'LL take care of her for my sake, friend, will you not?"

"As if she were my own sister. Have no fear, Balbi, she will be quite safe with me." And then turning to Lucia, who was seated in his own particular arm-chair, Taft continued, "I can't say I should have known you again, Miss Malfi, but then it's a good many years since I saw you at that Italian village with the forsaken name which I never could pronounce, much more remember."

"Ah! 'tis very long ago," replied Lucia, with a sigh. "Much has happened since then. But, signore, I shall perhaps incommode you staying here, and I have no right to."

"Not another word, miss. You do me honour being my guest and, besides, anything I can do for my old friend here is a pleasure to me. You stay as long as you like, and the more you make yourself at home the better I shall be pleased. Your quarters are not exactly Buckingham Palace, but you wouldn't find a warmer welcome there than you will here, and, at any rate, you will be able to rest, and you want that after all you've gone through, so you just do as you like. All

you want, you tell me, and I'll get it. I've sent for some macaroni, and a bottle of Lucca oil, and some good Chianti and Parmesan cheese, but that's about all the Italian food stuff I can call to mind, so you must let me know what else you would like, and it will be here quick sticks."

Balbi and Lucia laughed merrily at the efforts of the good-hearted Cockney to provide for his foreign visitor, and while thanking him warmly assured him there was no need for him to distress himself on her account, as his style of living would suit her equally well.

"Well, I must leave it to you, and if you don't get what you like it will be your own fault," said Taft. "But tell me, my dear Balbi, any news of that gallus rascal, Guelfo?"

"Not yet. I was at Throgmorton Avenue this morning, and the story there was that he had not yet returned, but might be back at any moment, and at his chambers at the Albany it was the same tale. I have made it right with the porters at both places, and they will give me the tip when he is back without my having to trust the lying lips of his gang of clerks."

"You think he'll return, then?"

"I do. Guelfo is no coward."

"I doubt if he'll get away again then. I saw one of my customers, a shareholder in that Belgravian scheme of his, and he said matters were fishy there, and the probability was Guelfo would be prosecuted."

"Let him be prosecuted, but let me see him first, and then I care not what becomes of him." And there was something in the tone of the little man

which boded ill for the welfare of the great financier. "But tell me, Taft, have you discovered the address of the man Raynor who worked for you?"

"I have. There it is," said Taft, laying a slip of paper on the table. "I had a lot of bother to get it, but I managed it at last. Shall you see him?"

"Yes. I might be able to learn from him what has become of the man Woolpert; they're both in the same gang. He and I have a little matter to settle. You didn't know that he tried to murder me out in Cuzco and would have done it too, had it not been for the Signor Vipan who rushed to almost certain death to save me. But it is too long a story to tell you now; some other time must serve."

"Strikes me, Balbi, you've got your hands pretty full of vendettas, or revenge, or whatever you Italians choose to call it. Mind and take care of yourself through it all. It comes natural to you, being a foreigner, I suppose, but I'm hanged if I should like it myself. I prefer a quiet life."

The Italian shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Ah, my good friend," he said, "you have not any hot blood in your veins. You are cold, calm and careful and can take an insult—"

"Can I? I pay it back as sharp, I can tell you, straight in the eye. There are no flies about me—there ain't."

"So. A word and a blow, and pouf! it is all over and forgotten, and you are good friends again. With us from the South it is not so. It burns in our blood, it is never forgotten, and it is

wiped out only by death. But I talk and do, nothing. I go now, leaving Lucia with you, to find this man Raynor. Ah, there is news for me!" as the well-known double rap of the telegraph messenger sounded through the house.

Taft went to the door and returned with an orange-coloured envelope which he handed to Balbi.

Glancing over the contents he said, "No answer," and on Taft's return, continued, "Listen, —'Ellis going on well. Wound healing. Have learnt that G. left motor at Stirling and took rail for south.—Kenrick.' He's on his way back to London. I'll have him yet. Any minute there may be news for me here. Open whatever may come and keep it for me. I shall not be away long, and to-night, Taft, my friend, I feel it here" —tapping his breast—"to-night he and I will square the account between us." And seizing his hat Balbi left the house.

"That man must have a curious sort of inside, miss, if he can feel all that," said Taft.

But Lucia only smiled and said nothing.

Meanwhile, in far-away Scotland, on the banks of Loch Tay a different scene was taking place. In the garden of Abermoy, Kenrick and Pauline were seated beneath the trees talking; their patient was calmly sleeping indoors and they were, in consequence, both relieved from duty.

The short time that had elapsed since the finding of Lucia and the disaster to Ellis, and which they had spent more or less constantly together, had but served to deepen and intensify the feelings which had arisen in the hearts of both of them that day at Taplow.

Pauline had for a time hesitated ; a feeling of loyalty to the dead Vipan had been present in her breast and had dominated her. But love is strong, and she came to feel, as many another before her has felt, that it is no disrespect to the dead not to bury one's heart with them in the grave. Time had mercifully blunted the intensity of her first sorrow, and she could now regard things in a different light from that in which they had at first appeared.

Thinking over matters, she could not hide from herself the fact that Wallace would have been the last man on earth to have wished her to cut herself off from the happiness of a home of her own from the morbid idea that in so doing she was honouring his memory. And so she gave herself up to the joy a kindly Fate had laid at her feet in the person of Roland Kenrick.

"Our stay in your good aunt's house will be a short one now," he was saying, "and I for one shall always look back on it as the pleasantest visit of my life, though I came unbidden."

"Yes," replied Pauline, ignoring the latter remark, "Mr Ellis has got on remarkably well, and you both are no doubt anxious to be after the grouse again. But he will have to be very careful for a time and not attempt to do too much."

"I'm afraid regret for my loss of sport has not entered my head. My thoughts have been much more pleasantly occupied. There are other things than shooting that enter into a man's life."

"Still, when you come to Scotland in August the moors must naturally have first place."

"Not with me, Miss Spencer, certainly not now."

There is something far nearer my heart, something which found its way in that day we met at Taplow for the first time, and which refuses to be dislodged, were I to make the attempt, which I have no desire to do. You remember that day?"

"I don't think I am ever likely to forget it. I was never so near death before."

"And for me it seemed to open the doors of a new life, a new happiness to which I had before been an utter stranger. You must know what I mean, Miss Spencer?"

Pauline did not reply; her head was bent and a flower she was holding suffered terrible mutilation at her hands.

"I know I have no right to speak. Our acquaintance has been a short one. You are above me in social position, and it may be in worldly wealth, but for all that my love for you forces me to put everything to the test and ask for your love in return. I know I am presumptuous, for did you not win the love of a man, a king among men, who was as far above me as the sky is above the earth, and yet my love for you compels me to seek to take his place. Pauline, what answer have you for me? Tell me that I may hope, that in time I may be able to win that love which I prize above everything on earth."

"Mr Kenrick," exclaimed Pauline, looking up at last, her cheeks dyed a lovely rose, "I think you know my heart was given wholly and truly to Wallace Vipan, and when he was taken from me I felt as though I was cut off for ever from every pleasure life can give, but Time has mitigated that anguish. Still, I can never forget him.

It is only a second-hand love I can bestow, but if you feel that you can be content with that, it is yours."

"My darling!" exclaimed Kenrick, as he drew her towards him and pressed his first kiss upon her willing lips. "I ask for no more. Suffer me to take his place and strive to be to you what I am certain he would have been. I am not so unreasonable as to ask you to forget him; only to give me the chance of proving that there are other loving hearts in the world beside his. You have given me your love, Pauline. You shall never repent the gift or wish to recall it. The rest of my life will be devoted to your service, and my one object will be your happiness. I cannot say more. Time alone will prove the truth of my words."

"I believe you, Roland, or I should not have given you the answer I have. I have passed through a great sorrow, and now I look to you to make the remainder of my life bright and happy. We shall have troubles and trials together, no doubt, but true love can always lighten the darkest path, and I think your love will be true, or I have sadly misjudged you."

But what need is there to describe this scene more fully. It is one which, with variations, is played every day, every hour, wherever there are men and women in this world of ours. The old story can never lose its fascination as long as there are ears to hear it, and the words breathed by Adam to Eve amid the beauties of Eden will be re-echoed again and again in endless sequence in palace and cottage until the course of time be run.

Later in the day Kenrick imparted the news of his new happiness to Ellis as he sat, wrapped in his dressing-gown in a chair by the open window. As he did so, he noticed an expression of pain pass over the invalid's face.

"Halloa, old chap, shoulder painful?" he exclaimed, breaking off in his recital.

"Yes, I had a sharpish twinge just then." And, closing his eyes, Ellis remained silent for a few moments as he fought bravely with his own disappointment. Then holding out his left hand—it was the right shoulder which had been wounded—he said,—

"You're a very fortunate fellow, Kenrick, and you have my hearty congratulations. A girl who could win the love of a man like Vipar is worth winning for her self. May you both be very happy, old fellow. And now leave me for a little and ask Miss Spencer if she would come to me."

"I've just been telling Ellis the news," said Kenrick, a few moments later to Pauline, "and he wants to see you. What a rum fellow he is, and yet I can't help liking him."

When Pauline entered Ellis's room he looked up and said,—

"Miss Spencer, will you accept my hearty good wishes for your future? Another has won the prize which at one time I thought might have been mine, but which I then knew I was not worthy to possess. But, thank God! I am not so selfish as not to be able from my heart to wish you a joy from which I am debarred. Miss Spencer, you have done more for me than any other woman upon earth, for, besides the present kindness you

are showing me, you have taught me that honour comes before gold. Fate for a time has brought our lives closely together. When we first met I had but one thought, money-making, and though I had been well brought up by a loving mother whose soul was a soul of honour, yet contact with the City and its ways had so dulled and warped my better nature that I had put aside all the good I had learnt at her knee and had given myself up, body and soul, to the lust for gold. You, Miss Spencer, have opened my eyes to my conduct; from the first, many things I did I was ashamed of, feeling you would never approve of them, but I did them all the same, for I was a slave and could not, or would not, tear myself free. I saw others about all doing the same, and, weak fool that I was, I followed in the crowd. But that is past now, and I am firmly resolved that for the future my hands shall be clean. In the City it will be a hard fight, I know, but your approval is worth the hardest fight a mortal can be called upon to undertake, and I'll face it, and let the world see that a man you have honoured with your friendship will not abuse that honour by his conduct, but that in his business he will act as he would in your presence, in fact, play the game."

"Mr Ellis, I can't tell you how pleased I am to hear this from you," said Pauline, and her eyes were bright with the emotion she felt. "And I know I can trust every word you say. I thoroughly appreciate the difficulties you must encounter in your work, but the harder the fight the greater is the glory of the victory, and I am sure you will succeed. What has taken place

to-day will, I hope, never sever our friendship, and in no case, I can assure you, could it have been more than friendship, so that you need have no idea that Roland has been your rival, and you will, I hope, continue your friendship with him. And now I shall permit you to talk no more. You are still my patient, and I look to you to do your nurse credit."

And with a bright smile Pauline quitted the room, leaving Ellis to his own thoughts, and he was surprised how little bitterness there was in them, so much can a good, tactful woman do in a few well-chosen words spoken at the right time.

Yet the future—the future and what it held—is hidden from us all. And what a strange future theirs proved to be !

CHAPTER XXIX

A SENSATION IN THE CITY

BALBI was in Lambeth, entering that street in which was the address Taft had furnished him with, when a man, wearing blue *pince-nez*, and whose face was white with terror, cautiously peered out from the entrance of one of the low, evil-smelling courts and back alleys which abound in the neighbourhood. Having apparently satisfied himself that he might venture to emerge, he did so at a run, and cannoned, as though purposely, against the undersized Italian in passing him.

"He's up to no good," muttered Balbi to himself. "There's some devilment on foot, I'll be bound." But his thoughts were quickly diverted on seeing a crowd of loungers, hooligans and slatternly-dressed women and girls further down the street surrounding a house, at the door of which stood a policeman.

It was the house he was intending to visit, and just as he had ascertained this fact the door opened and an inspector and a second constable appeared with a hand-cuffed man between them. A chorus of yells and imprecations greeted them, and for a few seconds it looked as though an attempt at rescue would be made; but better

counsels prevailed, especially as two more constables quickly came up, and together they formed a circle round their prisoner and marched him down the centre of the street.

As they passed Balbi he recognised the man as being the one who had joined Woolpert in the attack on him in the house in Vivian Square.

"What's he been up to?" he inquired of a decently-dressed man who was on the outskirts of the throng.

"I dunno for certain, but I did hear it was something about setting fire to a 'ouse up 'Oborn way."

"Ah! Is his name Raynor?"

"Can't say. Here, Billy!" calling to a half-dressed little ragamuffin, "what's yon bloke what's just nabbed called?"

"Jack Raynor—the fool! He oughter 'av looked more slippy. I give him the office that the coppers was coming down the street."

"Raynor, eh?" said Balbi, joining in. "Was the house in Saffron Hill?"

"Maybe it were," replied the urchin, gazing at the speaker with suspicion born of an upbringing in that haunt of crime and depravity.

Balbi turned away. It was no good pursuing his inquiries further. The man he was seeking was already in the grip of the law, and he would have no chance of wringing any information out of him, and he was in all probability a myrmidon of Guelfo since he had seen him in the company of Woolpert, to whose house Lucia had been taken on the occasion of the fire. Quickly he came to the conclusion that the fire itself was the out-

come of a plot on Guelfo's part to get rid of Lucia, and that the police, having secured the actual perpetrator of the crime, would not be long before they turned their attention to the man in whose brain it had originated. Therefore, if he wished to accomplish his own vengeance it behoved him to act quickly.

To his friend Taft's abode he hurried back and found that a telegram had arrived from the porter at the Albany during his absence. It was short, but it contained all the information he desired.

"Arrived. Going to his office."

"Quick, Lucia! Quick! The moment has come. We shall have him beneath our thumbs, and we will crush him. Dio! how we will crush him! Every pang he has caused us, every tear he has wrung from your dear eyes shall be paid for. We will exact everything, everything, a hundred times over. Ah, how he shall pay! Lend me your revolver, Taft, my dear friend; we have not time to go for mine."

"No, Balbi, none of that game. I don't want to see you at the Old Bailey. You must draw the line at killing. Remember, you've got this lady to take care of now."

"Bah! Think you I would kill him? No, no, my dear friend, he must not die yet; he has not had time to suffer. He must go through all we have gone through before he dies. I will not kill him, oh, dear, no! But he is a dangerous man and I must be prepared—ready to meet him. Lend it to me, my friend."

Very reluctantly Taft produced the weapon, and

his fears were not allayed on seeing Balbi withdraw the cartridges, examine them and then replace them previous to consigning it to his pocket.

"I shall wait all the evening for you to bring your good lady back, and to hear how you have got on, Balbi. And don't play the fool, there's a good fellow. I don't want to lose your company yet awhile. Keep that little machine in your pocket. I shall expect it back just as I lend it to you, do you hear?"

"Come, Lucia!" said the other in Italian. "Do not listen to him. He is good, but he is stupid and knows me not." And then turning to Taft he added in English, "All right, my friend, I will be careful. I will not shoot till I am quite obliged. Quick, Lucia! Quick!"

It was some little time after leaving Taft's house before they were able to secure a cab, and then as they drove to the City it was almost in silence. Balbi was thinking and planning.

His face worked and his lips moved rapidly as he silently rehearsed all he would demand from the man who had injured him so deeply, so terribly.

At Cornhill they descended and finished their journey on foot. Arriving at Throgmorton Avenue they found the door of the building in which Gueffo had his offices open. Some of the cleaners were coming out, having finished their work for the evening.

Quietly the pair made their way up the stairs. The gas was still burning in all the passages, for in some of the offices there were late workers.

Balbi paused. "Courage, Lucia," he whispered.

"Remember all we have gone through. Recall once more the happy days at Carmignano before this viper crossed our path. Think of our long separation, the years we have been apart, and be brave."

The woman did not answer in words, but her hand sought his and pressed it.

Arriving at the door of the clerks' office, Balbi tried it. It was not locked, so as he turned the handle very gently it opened in silence. They entered on tip-toe; the place was in darkness, the electric light was switched off, but along the floor, and cutting some of the desks and stools, was a ray of brilliant radiance. The door in the opposite wall leading into Guelfo's private room was ajar. There was someone inside. Sounds of footsteps and the rustle of papers could be heard.

Leading the way carefully amid the furniture, Balbi crossed to the opposite door, and glancing through, beckoned to Lucia, who had halted behind. When she was close to him he whispered in her ear,—

"See, we are only just in time, the scoundrel means flight! He is tearing up papers and providing himself with money!"

They saw Guelfo bend down to a drawer in the massive safe and transfer a bundle of notes to his hip pocket.

"Brace yourself up," he said in Italian. "The moment has come. Guelfo's career is ended—and by us. Have no—ah!"

But the whispered words died from his lips as a figure was seen to steal out of a cupboard in which Guelfo was wont to hang his hat and overcoat and

approach, catlike, the stooping man. Not a sound did it utter until close upon him, and then Guelfo suddenly turned, saying,—

“What, Woolpert! you’ve come back? It’s no use. Not a penny more, do you hear, you infernal scoundrel. Clear out—or by heaven! I send for the police.”

“You mean this?” cried the man.

“I do!”

“Then, Guelfo, there is my receipt,” he hissed. And drawing a dagger from his coat sleeve he plunged it with all his force up to the hilt in the Italian’s breast.

With a groan Guelfo staggered back and fell, but as he did so he thrust his hand into his pocket, and drawing a small revolver discharged it at Woolpert, who had turned and was making for the door. The man’s arms flew straight up, and staggering forward without uttering a sound, he fell forward heavily on his face upon the floor.

All this was the work of a moment. A tragedy had been enacted almost more quickly than the eye could follow, and when Balbi and Lucia rushed into the room it was to find a dead and a dying man.

In a second Lucia was kneeling beside Guelfo. All hard and revengeful thoughts had melted away at the sight of that awful, anguish-stricken face. Tenderly she raised his head, and with her handkerchief wiped the cold sweat which was gathering on his brow. He opened his closed eyes, and as they fell upon the woman he had so deeply wronged he said, with a faint smile,—

“Too late! You are too late, Lucia. You

cannot hurt me now. I have cheated you of vengeance at the last. You have scored once or twice, but mine is the winning trick."

"Hush, Giuseppe," she said in Italian, in a voice in which was no trace of anger. "I am not here to injure you, only to help you—to ease you if I can. Do not talk."

"You would not injure me!" he said with difficulty, with a glance of incredulity. "No, no, I know human nature better than that. I know—how—"

"I tell you it is true, Giuseppe. The past is forgotten, and as I myself hope to be forgiven—forgiven—"

"Do you—mean—this, Lucia? No—Dio!—you cannot. It is not possible!" he gasped.

"I do, I do." But talk not, Giuseppe. A doctor will soon be here, and will do all he can for you; meanwhile, lie still. Have you any brandy?"

The man made a negative sign. He could not speak.

Balbi had already turned the body of Woolpert over and ascertained that life was quite extinct. The bullet had entered the back of his head and lodged in his brain. Then he came across to where Guelfo was lying with his head resting on Lucia's knee. He stood gazing down on the wounded man with mingled feelings.

The sound of the pistol had brought the porter and several clerks who had been still in the building hurrying to the spot, and to them Balbi hastily explained what had taken place, sending for the police and a doctor.

Again Giuseppe Guelfo opened his wild, staring

eyes, and his voice was perceptibly weaker as he murmured, "It is good of you, Lucia—very good!" And then as he caught sight of Balbi, "You—will marry him; he has waited long for you. Ask him to speak to me."

Lucia made a sign to Balbi to approach, and he came and knelt down beside the dying man. He had to bend his head low to catch the words, so weak had his voice become.

"If you think I killed your friend Vipan you are wrong. His murderer lies there," he said in a hoarse whisper, with a glance in the direction of the body of Woolpert. "I only tried to make a good thing out of what had taken place."

Balbi shook his head.

"You don't believe me? You will know some day."

There was silence, and then in a low voice, which was only heard by Lucia and Guelfo, Balbi said,—

"Giuseppe Guelfo, I came here this evening with my heart full of anger and revenge against you. I came, determined to make you suffer as you have caused me and mine to suffer; to wring from you payment to the full for all the pain you have caused. I came, determined to—but there. It has been decreed otherwise. A Higher Power has not suffered me to be your judge. And to that Higher Power I bow. Giuseppe Guelfo, as far as I am concerned, the slate is wiped clean. The past—for the future I know of no past in which you play a part, and I think from what I know of her, Lucia will say the same. You are of our race, the same land is our mother. May the Madonna have you in her keeping."

He was rising, when Guelfo with an effort seized his hand and drew it to his lips. And, as if to confirm Balbi's words, Lucia bent low and pressed a last kiss on the damp brow of the man who, after all, was her husband.

He felt the action and a faint smile stole over his ashen face as with a sigh his spirit fled.

At that moment the doctor arrived, but a glance was sufficient in both cases to prove that his services would be of no avail, and after a word or two with the police inspector he quitted the place, leaving him to make arrangements for the inquest.

Before removing Woolpert's body, it was searched, and from the breast pocket was taken a well-worn leather silver-bound letter-case containing the notes he had received from Guelfo.

Balbi recognised the case in a moment. It was the one which Wallace Vipan always carried with him wherever he went, a last gift from Pauline before he started on one of his expeditions, and he remembered how on his first visit to her she had mentioned it as being one of the articles which were missing when the murder was discovered.

In his own mind he was now satisfied that he had misjudged Guelfo in this respect. It was Woolpert who had robbed him of his friend; Woolpert who, when out in Peru, by some means having learnt of his discovery of the old copper mine and of his being in communication with Vipan, had followed his letters to London and murdered his friend to gain possession of the vichaya leaf, and who must then have parted with it to Guelfo, who made use of it in the manner already described.

It was surely a ghastly story of greed which had entailed the death of three men and misery and ruin in the homes of many others, since the name of Guelfo at the head of the prospectus had induced many who could but ill afford it to invest all their savings in the mine, in the hopes of reaping a golden harvest.

“Come away, Lucia mia! We can do no good here,” said Balbi. “The police will see to all the rest. Our work is over.”

The woman had crossed the dead man’s hands on his breast, and unlinking a little silver crucifix she had worn on her watch-chain, she clasped his stiffening fingers about it, and with a final glance at the face which in the long ago had caught her girlish fancy she quitted the room, a free woman once more, free to bestow herself upon the man whose heart was a heart of gold.

CHAPTER XXX

THE AFTERMATH

SPRING had come once more; spring in name in England, spring in reality in the sunny land of Italy. In the old-world village of Carmignano, situate on the height overlooking the Arno and the lily city of Florence, everything was green and bright in the radiance of rejuvenescence. The vines were in leaf, and beneath the blue clear sky the land had thrown off its sombre winter garb and arrayed itself in a new mantle of vivid, living green.

How different was the scene that here met the eye to that which hemmed in and surrounded the toiler in the great city of London. There all was worry, strife, anxiety and disappointment, occasionally lightened by gleams of success: here all was peace, brightness, calm, and—Nature. There never was a truer saying than “God made the country; man made the town”; and its truth was borne forcibly to the mind of some of the little party who were sitting in the sunshine in the garden of a villa crowning the steep hill-side—a party of friends whose lives had been brought together by the inexorable decrees of Fate, and who had in a greater or less degree been affected by one of the sins of the City—a sin which had been far-reaching

in its influence, and the depth of which was but little known outside the circle of friends seated this sunny warm spring morning in the garden high up in the olive-clad hills.

It was a party of married folk, and to an outsider it would therefore have appeared of little interest; but for the reader who has followed the record of this curious drama of craft and crime thus far, the persons composing it may perhaps be able to claim some consideration and attention.

First, then, the host and hostess were Balbi and his wife Lucia. For there had been no delay with the little man in claiming possession of the woman he had loved so ardently and so long once she was freed from the shackles that had bound her in a loveless union; and within a few weeks of Guelfo's murder, or, as the dailies had been pleased to describe it in their placards, "The Great City Tragedy," the man and woman had been made one at the Italian Consulate in Finsbury Square. As soon as business would permit they had fled from London and had taken up their residence in the far-off home of their childhood. But their position now was very different from what it had been in former times. Balbi was a land-owner, and according to the Tuscan custom received from his tenants a half of the produce of the land they held under him in lieu of rent, he on his part watching over their interests and safe-guarding them much in the same way that the Lords of the Manors looked after their vassals in ancient days in England. And here at his villa he was receiving and dispensing lavish hospitality to those he had

known and learned to appreciate in far-off England —Gerald Mildmay and his six months' bride Dora, and Roland Kenrick and Pauline, who, after spending their honeymoon at Cannes, had, at Balbi's very urgent request, extended their travels into Italy with the express object of paying him a visit.

"This is better than Broad Street, eh, Kenrick?" said Mildmay, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air.

"Better! By George! it's better than the Riviera, and you can't have much higher praise than that; and yet we go on mugging away in dirty, filthy, smoky, dear old London when there are such lovely places like this holding out their arms to us. Just look at the view!"

"Then you like my country, eh?" remarked Balbi, his face beaming with smiles and satisfaction.

"I should just think we do! No wonder you left London as soon as you could after that wretched inquest," said Gerald.

"I would have come away sooner, but for one thing. I had to find that man Reichardt. There were one or two matters I wished to clear up."

"And you found him? I was still in Scotland and so heard very little about it. And I was not sorry. It was all so painful."

"Yes, I found him at last. I ran him to earth, as you say in your England. At first he would not speak, but when he saw I meant to do him no harm—for after all he was only Guelfo's cat's-paw—he told me everything, including not a few lies to make his story better. But there was not

much to tell that I did not already know. He only confirmed what I suspected. Let me give you very shortly the chief points of his story, for he seemed to be a kind of centre to which all the information came, and after that we can close the sad book of the past and not refer to it again.

"Yes, signore, do so, pray," said Dora. And then, turning to Pauline, "You won't mind, dear?"

"Certainly not. I shall be very glad if the signore will do so."

Balbi bowed, and continued, "Woolpert, as he called himself in England, came across me in Peru and, for a matter I need not now enter into, sought my life and would have taken it treacherously had it not been for my friend, Wallace Vipán, who, at risk of his own, saved me. From that moment Woolpert nursed a feeling of revenge towards him, and watched our doings more closely than I had any idea of. He still hung closely round me after my friend's return to England, and when I had discovered the copper mine known as the 'Queen of the Cordilleras,' and written to the signore about bringing it out, this man gained a knowledge of the contents of that letter and set about obtaining possession of the contents—I mean the vichaya leaf.

"Woolpert was a member of the 'Brotherhood of the Pentagon,' many members of which are in your great city. He succeeded in his purpose at the cost of the life of our friend. Then, not daring to appear further in the matter himself, he, with the help of another member, Reichardt, sold his secret to Guelfo in Paris. Many of the subsequent

events you are already acquainted with. There were three members of 'this 'Brotherhood of the Pentagon' who were more or less mixed up in the affair—Woolpert, his tool Reichardt, and a workman of my friend Taft called Raynor. It would seem that I was closely shadowed on my arrival in town, and my frequent visits to Taft being noticed, and perhaps some of my conversations overheard, an attempt on his safe was made by Raynor in the belief that, being a stranger in London, I had deposited some of my valuable papers with him for safe custody. That attempt, as you know, came to nothing. And now," he said, turning to Pauline, "I come to a part personal to yourself, and if I do not put it as delicately as I should, you must please pardon me for I am not English."

"Never mind, signore, go on."

"Guelfo discovered the presence of my dear wife"—taking her hand in his affectionately as she stood behind him. "He had lost sight of her for years, nor had he troubled to find her, but now, having the intention of making you his wife, he found her very much in the way. She was to be removed. He visited her at her rooms in Saffron Hill and lulled any suspicion she might have had, at the same time weaving a hellish plot for her destruction. But perhaps you will have seen it in the papers at the time of Raynor's trial, how he took the next house which happened to be empty, stocked it with everything that would burn, and made a connection through the wall of Lucia's room, inserting a pipe beneath her bed which led from a cylinder of gas, so that one evening when

she had returned home and was preparing to go to rest, Raynor, whom he had employed to carry out his plot, turned on the gas and set fire to the adjoining premises. The rest you know."

"Go on, Balbi—go on. It was devil's work!" said Gerald. "Let us hear all."

"As you will, signore. I was able to save her, but only to place her more fully in the villain's power. She was conveyed first of all to Vivian Square, and the following day Reichardt took her to Scotland and placed her with Guelfo's keeper, Archie M'Queen. The effects of the noxious gas had so far passed away that she was able to walk and conduct herself as an ordinary human being, but her mind was a blank; she could remember nothing. She knew not where she was or what was taking place. M'Queen kept her in a cave he had discovered on the hillside, in which from time to time he distilled whisky. Occasionally taking her with him on to the moor for the sake of fresh air, she once managed to escape, and it was then that you so fortunately saw her. Guelfo's idea was to take her abroad, and while her mind was still blank get her confined in some asylum as insane. He intended to take her himself, and through Reichardt had already made inquiries as to boats at Leith. This brings us to the time when I was able to rescue her and devote my whole care to her safety and happiness. And tell me, my friends, does it not look as if I have been successful?" gazing fondly up into the smiling face of his wife as she bent over his shoulder.

"Ah! he has been very good to me. He is a true, true husband!" said the happy Lucia. And

bending her head, she lightly kissed the iron-grey scanty locks.

"Well, Balbi, old fellow," said Gerald, grasping his hand, "you deserve her, I'm sure. And I hope you'll both live long to enjoy your happiness."

"Thank you, Signor Mildmay, thank you."

"Do you remember I hold something of yours, Signor Balbi?" asked Pauline, turning to the Italian.

"Of mine?"

"Yes. A letter that was handed to me by him who has gone"—Pauline always spoke of Vipan thus—"an enclosure; don't you remember?"

"Ah, true. It is of no value now. It was only written in case my friend outlived me and at any time came across Lucia. But I have found her myself, and he is gone. Tear it up, Mrs Kenrick; tear it up."

"Very well, I will. But tell me, signore, what became of that man Reichardt? Is he still in town?"

"I cannot say, but I think not. When Raynor was tried for incendiarism, though he held his tongue about his friends, much came out in evidence which indirectly affected them. The police got wind of the Pentagon Brotherhood, so the London members thought it was time they disappeared before worse things happened, and they scattered—Reichardt returning, I believe, to his native Bavaria."

"And much good may he do it," laughed Kenrick. "He seems to be an absolute rascal. It's a pity the police did not pay him the same attention they did his friend Raynor."

"Ah, it is only postponing the event," laughed the Italian. "He is safe to come to a bad end, sooner or later."

"And now," continued Pauline, "I think we may drop the subject, for it must be a painful one to some of us, and in this glorious land of sunshine and beauty pain and suffering seem out of place, more especially at this season of the year when all nature is bursting into new life and enjoyment. No wonder you are fond of your beautiful home, Signor Balbi."

"Ah! I have been far, I have seen many lands, many cities, many peoples, but my heart has never failed in its loyalty to the land of my birth."

"And you," said Dora, turning to Lucia, "are you as faithful to it as your husband?"

"Quite. I would have come home long ago, but I was proud. When I lived here I was someone, but then I became no one till Piero found me and made me his wife, and I wanted nothing more. I would come back at once. But there was sadness even then. My father and mother were dead; their name was no longer known in the village; I was a stranger, it was few except those I left as young people who were still here. But one thing remained—the place itself. Carmignano of to-day is the Carmignano of my youth. This house, these olives, these vines all seemed like old friends, and held out their branches and their trailing tendrils in welcome to me, and I was happy—ah, how happy!"

"Come, let us walk, dearest," urged Balbi, rising and taking his wife's hand in his as he might that

of a little child. "Come, let us show our friends the improvements we are going to make."

And then the party—surely the happiest in the whole wide world—strolled away from the big white house down the long pergola of fresh green vines, amid the peace and quiet of the old-world Italian countryside, having left behind them forever the Sins of the City.

THE END

